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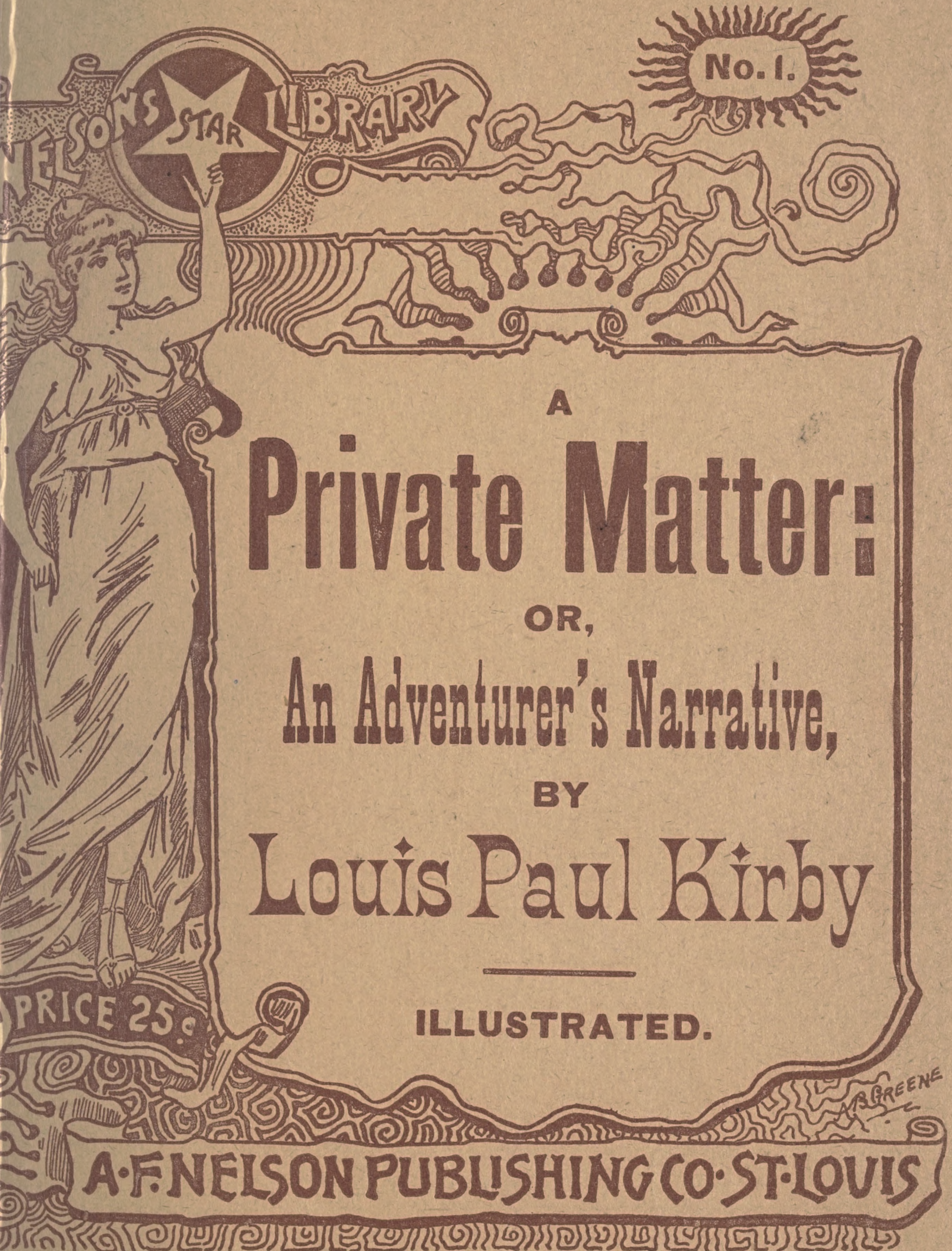
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A
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OR,

An Adventurer's Narrative,

BY

Louis Paul Kirby

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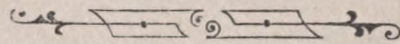
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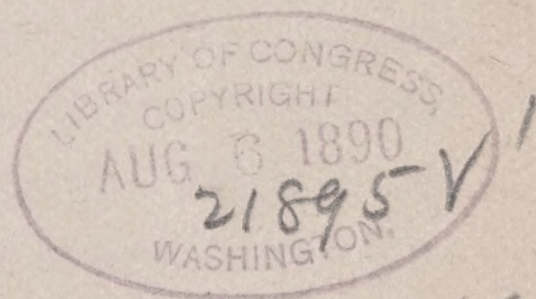
AN ADVENTURER'S NARRATIVE.

BY

LOUIS PAUL KIRBY,

Author of "Agnes: a Story of the Streets;" "Dreams of Youth;"
"The Confessions of Clarence Gale;" Etc.

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PREFACE.

My realistic novel, "Agnes: a Story of the Streets," has been severely criticised by the monitors of the press, and I am very nearly convinced that I made a grave mistake in publishing the book, as my readers, ignoring the philosophy of the story, devoured it for its erotic features. Yes, I am guilty of a great crime, and the whole of frail humanity are my victims. I regret having written the story—though it has proven successful—not because of the criticisms of the press, but because of the pain and mortification it has caused my family and friends. Then, too, the public is weary of the torrid imaginings of realistic writers. This is shown in the popularity of the tales of adventure, and the romantic novels of the better class of writers. Their stories are very rarely true to life, as everything that treats of life partakes of a certain element—though not necessarily a gross element—of realism, but the reading public sees enough of the base side of life in every day intercourse with men, and

looks to literature for a means of soaring above terrestrial matters into the pure realms of the ideal. Yet all authors cannot confine themselves to chaste imagery. It is impossible to write truthfully about men and women without referring, however incidentally or sparingly, to animal passion for the reason that love is distinctly animal. No story is interesting without love, and love necessarily suggests a desire to mate, and mating is odoriferously terrestrial. Writers of lofty romances may eschew details, but when they refer to love they become realistic, though not offensively so. Let an aspiring writer prepare a novel without love or references to the distinction between sexes and then see how many readers he will have!

There is an odor of clay about everything that concerns humanity. Study men and you will find the thoughts ever uppermost in their minds is the topic handled by realistic writers--lust! Women, with more delicate senses, are apt to be reserved and less easily studied. But men and women are of the same vile clay, actuated by the same impulses and possessed of the same weaknesses. Where a man would blazon forth his depravity and the nature of his low, vicious thoughts, a woman remains silent; but of the two, a woman is often the more depraved, as men in their boist-

erous protestations of lasciviousness, are frequently more virgin in body than in mind, for this reason: let a woman avow loose morals and she is eagerly sought after, to appease the passion of men, but a man, no matter how willing he is to be seduced, is not sought after by erring damsels. He must seek them himself.

Study a man and you will soon penetrate his weaknesses. You can never, never fail to find a flaw, even in your ideals. Some men can be read at a glance, others are deeper, more impenetrable. But not one, possessed of the full powers of his sex, is beyond weaknesses of the flesh. Alack, I am not a pessimist, because I have given up the disgusting study of men. Life is bright—if you ignore its darkness—and my advice is to enjoy all the pleasures that are to be found here, as there is no certainty for the future. “A Private Matter” is not realistic, but a tale of action, and with this assurance, I leave you.

L. P. K.

A Private Matter.

CHAPTER I.

The gray dawn of a winter's sun was just breaking over New Orleans, as the keeper of a cheap lodging house, in a remote quarter of the city, was ascending the narrow stairway leading to the garret, where inferior guests were lodged. After pausing at the landing to recover his breath, he approached a small door, facing the head of the stairway, and listened attentively for a few minutes, then hearing no sounds from within, rattled the door to attract the attention of the occupant of the apartment. There was no answer.

“Strange,” he muttered, passing his hand in a troubled manner across his forehead, “he was in in his room all day yesterday, and does not respond to my knock to-day. Something must be wrong.”

Calling to an attendant, he sent him for an axe ; then carefully prying open the door he entered the chamber of his too reclusive guest. The room was bare and cheerless. Its furniture was scant and of the meanest description, and the

unwashed windows, with other evidences of untidiness, bespoke the presence of a slovenly servant.

It was some time before the host became accustomed to the gloom, greatly augmented by the twilight of early morning; but after a short interval, during which he stood near the doorway, apparently half dazed by evil forebodings, he peered keenly about the apartment, and, by a rapid survey, comprehended the situation thoroughly.

“Zounds,” he exclaimed, “I was always unfortunate! Why did he come here to die?”

Then in a milder tone, he turned to his negro attendant and added: “Off, Saul, and bring a priest to see the poor man. At least, his soul may be saved.”

As the servant hurried off in search of the ecclesiastic, the landlord again took a survey of the apartment; this time more slowly and examining each minute detail.

The lodger was lying upon a small cot in a corner of the room, and his pallid face and nerveless jaws plainly indicated the presence of death. His face was upturned and his eyes, wide open and glazed in death, stared at the blackened rafters overhead. One hand grasped the coverlet, while the other, pressed close to his breast,

clutched a small gold medal, which sparkled brightly amidst the surrounding dinginess.

A thin gray beard, an emaciated frame and a suit of shabby black clothing marked the dead man's individuality. His face bore no expression, though his features, delicate, large and regular, indicated education and refinement, and suggested a bright, hopeful past.

The host was called from his contemplation of the dead man by a recollection of his pecuniary interest in the estate of his inanimate guest. He immediately proceeded to examine into his resources. A few articles of soiled linen were scattered about the room, and a small hair trunk, with the lid open and a portion of the contents protruding, filled one of the corners. The eager fingers of the landlord soon overhauled the contents of the trunk, and the honest fellow was disappointed to find so little. Several small articles: relics, valuable and interesting only to their original possessor, some worn and worthless clothing and a bulky manuscript filled the trunk. The package containing the manuscript, which proved to be these, the Confessions of an Adventurer, was labeled thus:

“SUCH IS LIFE — MY LIFE,

OLIVER BENJAMIN.”

CHAPTER II.

This recital would be more pleasant to me were I to ignore the stormy days of my young manhood, when contending passions, by irresistible impulses, urged me by turns to good and evil actions. A review of my happy childhood, or cheerful, aspiring youth, would make me more tranquil and resigned, but no one cares for the monotonous details of the boyhood days of even great men. It is action—the tumult and excitement of life, which interests and inspires.

Well, as such is the case, follow my narrative, for I have had my share of experiences. Superfluous words are wearying. Details are tiresome in a tale of action, therefore, I will plunge into the midst of my narrative.

Toward the close of the year 182—, the regiment, in which I was then a second lieutenant, received orders to repair to Vera Cruz, there to make its winter headquarters and suppress all uprisings of the turbulent natives of that locality. The chaos, resulting from the elevation of Don Augustin Iturbide to the supreme power of government, had not yet subsided, and many of the people declined to recognize the plebian monarch's authority — some taking up arms to oppose it.

I had gone to Mexico, like many others, with vague dreams of early distinction. I had pictured myself a general before the first few months had passed, and reveled in dreams of martial glory, and the honors heaped upon the head of a young hero by a grateful people. They continued to be dreams, as a year had now passed and longed for promotion had not yet been made, and I was serving under the colors of an upstart emperor, instead of the flag of a glorious republic. I was now ordered to Vera Cruz, there, in all probability to pass another year as an unnoticed second lieutenant. Never, in all my life, did the meaning of the old Spanish proverb, "all is not gold that glitters," appear to me so vividly as at that moment.

I had left a comfortable home in Virginia, only to learn, after undergoing a year's experience of the hardships of military service in Mexico, a wholesome, though unpalatable truth.

It was after several days hard marching that we came in sight of the sea coast. The sun was just sinking behind the range of western hills, gilding the earth with its mellow glow; and the white walls and spires of Vera Cruz lay before us, glittering in the rays of the setting sun. I had never witnessed a scene more beautiful. It may have been the exuberant fancy of youth,

but at the time I fully believed that a distant view of the city rivaled any mortal conception of the beauty of Paradise.

No one, save I, seemed impressed by the inspiring scene, though all rejoiced at the near approach to rest and shelter. Even the weary animals we bestrode manifested an eagerness to proceed, which, by the way, they had displayed at no other time during the day.

I was riding alone as we neared the city—my fellow officers looking upon me as a mercenary, though many of them were Spaniards, proudly holding aloof from me—when a horseman reined beside me and startled me from a reverie, into which I had fallen, by suddenly exclaiming:

“Cheer up, Benjamin, we are nearing a warm supper and the home of my ancestors. I was born there,” pointing toward the city.

I had turned at the first word, and confronted a tall, slender young man, in a cavalry officer's uniform, similar to the one I wore, save that his epaulettes indicated that he ranked as a captain. He would have been facially handsome had it not been for a cynical curl of his thin upper lip, which gave his countenance a haughty, repellant expression, which seemed half sinister at times.

“Well, I rejoice to hear that, *Vermodi*,” I replied, glad that there was some one who did not

disdain to talk to me, "for I fear that we would know as few here as in the capitol."

"Don't trouble yourself on that score," he replied, confidently, "as I know every family of note in the city."

"I suppose you are overjoyed to again be among your people?"

"No, far from that," was the unexpected response, "I almost fear to enter the place. All my people were staunch royalists, and it will pain those still living to see me in the usurper's uniform. Yes," he continued reflectively, "we were all Bourbonists—it is part of our nature to be so, and I—why, I am no exception, truly."

His voice had assumed a confidential modulation and he watched me closely, with his keen, dark eyes, noting the effect of his words upon me as he spoke. Seeing the expression of unconcealed surprise and horror on my face, he attempted to correct himself.

"I mean that I was—that is, I am, or should be, as it were, and am not. Benjamin, I know you are a man of honor. Listen! Why should I fear to tell you all?"

"Captain Vermodi," I interrupted, "for that reason, I decline to become your confidant. What you have incautiously told me I shall consider unspoken and strive to forget. Any further

communication, of a treasonable nature, that you may insist upon making, will most certainly be placed in the hands of my superiors. Remember, sir, we are officers of the Imperial army, and after your oath, I am shocked to hear such a declaration from you."

I might have been unnecessarily harsh, but the recollection of the recent execution of a young officer, for whom a spy—under the guise of a republican conspirator—had laid a trap, was fresh in my memory.

"Nobly spoken, friend Benjamin," cried Vermodi, with an affectation of heartiness in the tone of his voice which belied the malignant gleam in his dark eyes, "I was only jesting. Do not take my idle words seriously. By the way," he added, looking me in the face, after a short pause, with a frank smile which greatly puzzled me, "I expect you to accompany me, soon after we become settled in Vera Cruz, to my aunt's residence, where you will meet many pleasant people. Some are a little cranky regarding political matters, but they all come from good stock and my aunt's receptions are stately affairs; only the best people attend them; but for all that, I think you will enjoy an experience of the kind, for you Americans consider everything an experience if it is not an investment. But, I will see you again

after we are ensconced in our new quarters.”

Turning his horse, with a quick, violent motion, he galloped back to his command. I followed him with my eyes as he proudly rode away, feeling painfully conscious of having lost a friend — one of the few I could boast of — and made an enemy.

CHAPTER III.

The bustle attending our arrival having subsided, I settled down in my comfortable quarters at the Imperial inn, hoping to gain some rest after the fatigue of our long journey. There was a fire burning on the hearth, although the day was quite warm, to expel the mustiness from the room, it not having been occupied for some time previous. The thick walls of the room, built of rough stone, were concealed behind gaily colored cotton hangings, and the immense bed, standing near the center of the floor, was curtained with faded pieces of the same material.

As the room was better furnished than the average apartment found in Mexican inns, at that period, and was far more inviting than the officers' quarters at the barracks, I regarded it with complacency, and was wondering when I was to be provided with a repast, when the door was unceremoniously thrown open and a bright looking Mexican girl tripped across the threshold, bearing a tray, with several steaming dishes as its burden. This she laid upon a small table before me, and the savory odor, reaching my nostrils, did not delay me from doing full justice to the repast. The girl stood beside me as, with the

keen appetite of a hungry trooper, I voraciously devoured the food, and seemed greatly amused by my demonstrative hunger. Having assured myself that the last morsel had disappeared, I turned the beaming countenance of a satisfied epicure upon the fair waitress.

“What is your name, pretty one?” I asked, with a most parental smile—the benign expression not disappearing even when the lass made a grimace and briefly replied, as she piled the dishes on the tray, with a deafening clatter:

“Nama.”

“Do you live here, Nama?” I enquired, not having anything else to ask her.

“Yes, senor.”

“Is the host your father?”

“No, senor, he is my uncle.”

Her innocent frankness and fascinating simplicity were too much for my warm blood, and as she brought my meals regularly, a week had not passed ere I was in a fair way of losing my heart. At times, when my advances became too bold, she would give me a coquettish box on the ear and run laughing from the room.

This flirtation, in the light of later experiences, seemed very foolish, but as Nama was the only woman I knew in Vera Cruz during the first few weeks of my stay there, it was pleasant

to have a frolic with her, in the evenings, after going through a long day of drills and inspections.

One morning, I awoke earlier than was my usual habit—having retired early the previous evening to overcome a fit of ennui—and was lying irresolute as to whether I should take another nap, or arise, when I heard a female voice singing beneath my window. The tune was melodious and the voice was fresh and sweet.

“The chevalier from o'er the waters
Comes to woo our Spanish daughters;
Will he change their glee to sorrow—
Will he depart with the morrow?”

Feeling anxious to know the songstress, as the serenade was obviously meant for me, as my vanity suggested, I approached the lattice and peered out. The window opened upon a large vegetable garden adjoining the tavern, in which the singer was standing. The lattice prevented me from obtaining a view of the part of the garden directly beneath my window, so I opened the casement; then, protruding my inquisitive head, I looked down.

The noise of the opening casement disturbed the songstress and the song died on her lips.

It was Nama singing. She was seated upon a long, wooden bench, assisting an old woman,

probably a servant, in preparing some vegetables for cooking and, save by her sudden silence, seemed not to have detected my presence. The old woman, unconscious of my appearance overhead, doubtless due to impaired hearing, for I made noise enough, continued to remonstrate against the laziness of her companion.

I coughed slightly, to attract Nama's attention, but she bent her head over her task—very evidently deeply engrossed—and mutely declined to notice me. Tiring of my unsuccessful efforts to gain some token of recognition from her, I took a small silver coin from my pocket and tossed it down, hoping that it would fall in her lap. It landed, instead, in the large basin, used by the old woman, with a ringing, metallic sound, that could have penetrated a sepulchre, judging from the effect upon my distended organs of sound and the immediate result in the garden. When I saw where the coin had fallen, I hastily withdrew my head out of sight. An oppressive silence ensued, and when I again looked out the window, the garden was empty. Taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air, I carelessly wondered what would be the outcome of my adventure.

CHAPTER IV.

Dressing myself with great care, I awaited the arrival of breakfast; expecting that Nama would be the waitress, as usual, and determined to have a serious talk with the lass. The meal was unduly delayed and I could hear the smothered rumble of voices below in the hallway, but did not care to investigate the cause of the confabulation, nor the detention of my breakfast, as I was reflecting upon the step I imagined I was about to take.

Finally, after fully an hour's waiting, and the time for my appearance at the barracks was nearing, the door was slowly pushed open, after a discreet knock, and the old woman I had seen in the garden hobbled in, bringing the delayed breakfast. Placing it on the table, she turned and was on the point of silently leaving the room, when I detained her by the query:

“Where is Nama?”

“Ask her uncle,” answered the old woman, harshly.

“Why should I ask Senor Tarf a question that you could easily answer?”

The old woman's insolent look irritated me more than her words, and it was with difficulty

that I restrained myself from catechising her for her bad manners.

“You Americans have strange ideas,” was the reply, as she scanned me closely, “you strive to wrong every maid you meet—we Mexicans”—this proudly—“woo with purer intent and love, though blindly, but one, to an indefinite extent.”

The Spanish of this answer, in the old woman's limited vocabulary, was not so poetic, though it conveyed the same meaning. Hoping to learn the cause of her suspicious demeanor, I took exception to her insinuation and returned:

“I am not aware of the ‘American’ weakness having been exemplified in my conduct toward Nama—pray explain yourself.”

“Your attentions go further in Mexico than you seem to believe. I can't say that your intentions are evil, but one can never tell—you come of a treacherous race.”

“You are a strange people,” I exclaimed, indignant that one of a race of assassins and faithless friends should apply such a false imputation to my fellow countrymen, yet determined to restrain my wrath, both on account of the age of the woman and because I had an object in view, “if you imagine I have shown Nama other than the most commonplace attentions? However, it matters little. If you guard your maid-

ens with such jealous care, why send them to wait upon every chance guest at your tavern? But I understand your motives."

"A motive!" exclaimed the old woman, with some surprise; then regaining her composure, she assumed an injured air, and refused to continue the conversation by abruptly leaving the room.

"They are scheming to trick me into marrying Nama," I thought; "possibly, they are attracted by my epaulettes, or there may be something deeper and darker behind it all. I must be certain, lest I make a false step."

The niece of a tavern keeper for a wife? Why not? I was but the offspring of a common citizen—ordinary planter. True, he was wealthy and knew the names of a dozen, or so, of his ancestors, who had, in turn, been wealthy, sometimes honored and always respected, if not for personal achievements, at least for their lands and chattels and their stability of character. But it was equally true that I was a wanderer, an alien, an adventurer—a man without love of country or filial affection. I had been reared without a mother's love and guidance and instructed under the stern eyes of a martinet, my father. I could not love him after I had looked into his cold, soulless gray eyes and real-

ized the selfishness, lovelessness of his nature. How could affection, outgrowth of a fertile soil, rear itself from the dry sands of desert? My father's eyes chilled me when I looked into their icy depths. In my imagination, I thought I could penetrate behind those cold gray eyes and detect the false workings of his deceitful mind. Could I find love and sympathy in the green eyes of a mad-dog? Does the meadow blossom bless the tread that crushes it to the earth, from the dampness and darkness of which it had sprung to imbibe the brightness and sunshine of day. No, I detested, I loathed—what say I? Loathed? Yes, I loathed the sight of him who quelled the generous impulses of my bouyant boyhood, who robbed my youth of its brightest hours, and made my heart sick with a burden of worldly philosophy, and my mind, rabidly imaginative by his very effort to destroy that finer sense, which makes poets miserable, and poor men drunkards. I had lost my love of country—else why should I leave it with none of the inducements which cause the people of foreign lands to flock to the grand republic of the new world—and I had become ambitious, a mercenary soldier seeking fame, fortune and glory at any sacrifice of conscience, life or my immortal soul. I cared little though I won a harlot! Yet hold, the suspicion

cast upon Nama's virtue deterred me from the union I had determined upon.

The waitress, as a chaste, pure maid, I would have made my wife; but was she pure and chaste? The doubt, once aroused, became fixed in my mind, and I was soon almost confident of Nama's frailty. Ah, what an awful mistake I made.

What have I written? Something incoherent, vague — mad I fear. I must continue my narrative, since I am so deficient in philosophy and my digressions are so irritating. Pity a verbose old man and overlook those parts that you have no desire to read. If I were only twenty years younger, I could tell the story better, but now, now I can make no pretense of writing well-balanced dialogue, nor a narrative full of the fire and vim of youth. In a plain narrative, such as I am capable of, I will make no errors, for my memory is good, and do moral injury to no one.

As I have loquaciously stated, being an American, I had no false ideas of superiority in rank, and no objection to the match on that score, but I resolved to delay the matter until I had ascertained the cause of the anxiety to precipitate the nuptials of a couple having made no formal matrimonial negotiations and, in fact, having scarcely thought of the matter. While I was thus ruminating, a thundering rap at the door was

followed by the entrance of Senor Tarf, who seated himself with a mysterious air of importance, and after a long silence, during which I stared haughtily at him, blandly remarked:

“I think you desire to see me, senor.”

“You are mistaken,” I replied, with emphasis, “I do not desire to see you.”

“Well, since your modesty — a commendable quality, I assure you — prevents you from opening the discussion, I will do so,” said the host, rubbing his hands together and smiling affectionately. “I desire to learn your intentions towards Nama. Oh, don’t protest! I am sure that your diffidence, your manly diffidence has kept your tongue tied and I —”

“You surprise, amaze me,” I exclaimed, waving my hand, half distractedly in the air, and causing Senor Tarf some uneasiness by the action. “What do you mean? explain yourself, or I shall think myself in a mad house.”

“Dame Isabella told me that you requested to speak to me about Nama. The little girl herself confesses that you have promised to wed her more than once. You certainly do not deny this?”

No, I could not! I remembered that I had playfully, jestingly, said to Nama that I was going to make her my wife, some day. I said

many other foolish things, which I now regretted. She blushed—I understand it all now—and believed me sincere in all I said. Poor child, she did not imagine that I was amusing myself with her and, perhaps, had earnestly treasured all the silly words I had uttered. The feeling of affection for the girl, which was maturing in my heart, was chilled—I did not feel a sad sympathy for her, at the time, but felt vexed and angered that her childishness should have caused me such annoyance.

“Oh! what a fool I have been,” I thought, “and what persistent, irritating people these Mexicans are.”

“Senor,” I said aloud, with slow emphasis, turning a flushed, angry face toward Senor Tarf, who, having retreated to the door, was regarding me with unconcealed amazement, “I did not send for you and can see no excuse for this intrusion. Should I ever feel inclined to wed your niece, I will lose no time in acquainting you with the fact and asking your consent unsolicited.”

As I spoke, Senor Tarf’s face became very red, whether from rage or mortification I do not know, and with an unceremonious bow, he passed out the door.

CHAPTER V.

Again night had come, and I was sitting in my room, striving to read by the light of a smoky tallow candle. A timid rap on the door arrested my attention.

“Come in,” I called out.

The door was softly opened and Nama entered, quickly closing it after her.

“Why, Nama,” I exclaimed, “what brought you here?”

“Hush,” she whispered, agitatedly, placing a finger to her lips.

How pretty she looked! Her round, girlish face was very pale and wore a serious expression. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement and her dark hair hung in disorder about her shoulders. She wore a plain, blue cotton gown, which fitted her well rounded form neatly.

After listening attentively for a few moments, she seemed assured that her absence had not been detected.

“You must not tell on me,” she said, in a frightened tone. “They told me not to come up here, but I thought that I would see you any way.”

I was annoyed by the intrusion, after what

had occurred, but adapting myself to the circumstances, we were soon engaged in an earnest, though contraband conversation.

How passionate she was. She threw her arms around my neck, and forced me to caress her. Yes, she told me, all unbidden, that she loved me and I, carried away by the heat engendered by the violence of her passion, embraced her, kissed her, made vehement pledges of my undying affection. How cruel, how base I was. I should have been stronger, I should have spoken to her harshly and stifled the love she felt for me.

As she threw herself into my willing arms and kissed me rapturously again and again, she cried :

“You will never, never love another, Carlos?”

“Never, as long as I live,” I replied, unhesitatingly, insincerely.

“Then I am happy, very happy.”

Her feverish cheeks burned with desire, and her eyes flashed with the intense yearning that seemed consuming her. I touched her and she trembled with delight. Clinging to my breast, with her hot cheeks pressed close to mine, mutely beseeching me to appease the passion which, God knows, I did not instil, she fought my few wavering scruples and finally mutual desire conquered.

Alas, where was the proud, chaste chivalry of my youth? Why was I carried away? Nama, Nama, it was not my fault that you were wronged — nor was it thy fault, poor girl, for you should not be blamed for loving more strongly and fervently than other women. Intense love, like intense ambition, leads but to ruin.



CHAPTER VI.

I was steadying Nama on a chair as she endeavored to fasten the curtain to the bed, it having been torn down during our frolic, when she paused suddenly and her flushed, laughing face, again turned deathly pale and the serious look returned.

“Some one is calling me,” she whispered, as a voice on the stairway called her name. “I must leave you now.”

Clasping her in my arms and imprinting a kiss upon her blushing cheek, I murmured :

“To-morrow night, in the garden.”

After a momentary hesitation, in which duty and passion struggled for the mastery, she tossed her head and, with a reckless laugh, answered :

“Yes.”

Then, slipping from my embrace, she crept noiselessly to the door, and upon peeping through a crevice to see that the way was clear, started back with a cry of dismay, the crimson blushes dying her face and neck.

Cursing my ill-luck, I expected to meet the reproachful gaze of an outraged uncle, and had half begun to suspect that Nama was party to an intrigue to force me into a marriage, when after

a momentary pause, the door opened and Philip Vermodi entered. As he passed through the doorway, Nama slipped out. I was relieved to find that my visitor was not her indignant relative, but not gratified to see the proud captain at that moment.

“Well, never mind,”—his sarcastic lips curled as he spoke—“I admit that she is pretty. If she were less florid, I swear she would be beautiful,” and he laughed as though his jest could be appreciated by me.

I was both angry and confused, and mumbled a few meaningless words, which Vermodi took no notice of as he continued:

“Hurry yourself, Benjamin, there is no time to lose; we are already late for the reception.”

I had forgotten all about the reception and protested that I was in no condition to attend, but Vermodi would listen to no excuses. He had promised to introduce me to his friends and meant to do so. Hastily adjusting my disarranged garments, I prepared to accompany my guide. As we left the house, Vermodi remarked.

“Benjamin, whatever you see, to-night, you are bound, as a man of honor, never to disclose.”

“If you intend to take me to a treasonable gathering,” I answered, stopping suddenly, “I must decline to accompany you. If I am not careful,

Vermodi, I may hold a levee behind the barracks, at sunrise some morning, which would not be at all to my liking."

"Your suspicions are all the more painful that they are unjust," he replied, with an air of injured pride. I then regretted having expressed my suspicions and a silence ensued, which remained unbroken until we reached the entrance to the park surrounding a large, old-fashioned mansion, in a quiet part of the city.

During the walk from the tavern, I asked myself if Captain Vermodi were really my friend, that he sought my company after the manner in which I had spoken to him on the day of our arrival in Vera Cruz, or an enemy whose blow, when dealt, would prove all the more blighting that it was deferred and the enemy unknown until too late. I began to feel somewhat uneasy, but after abandoning scruples and succumbing to one temptation, I had not strength of character sufficient to guard against a second mis-step. Before we arrived at the entrance to the park, I had half determined to point the conspiracy, of which I was fully assured. I might have broken the silence, but our arrival prevented me from taking a step that might have altered my whole future.

Yet all these opportunities are placed in our

paths to be neglected and regretted, and remembered only to make our burdens heavier, if our chosen paths lead not to success. But the finger of destiny marks out our paths in life; some men are called upon to do great things, some men have joy, others woe, but no man could accomplish more than he does, nor be better, or worse, for fate rules circumstances, and circumstances control men.

As we paused at the entrance gate-way, Vermodi heaved a sigh of relief and said:

“Here we are! You can now throw aside the garb of a recluse and enter society.”

The gate did not stand open, as might be expected on the evening of a reception, nor was there a light exposed. A closed carriage drove up as we stood before the gate and passed through without parley, the porter being on the alert. Following the vehicle through the gate-way, which was immediately closed after us, we found ourselves in the park. The park was enclosed by a high brick and stone wall, but as it was dark, save where I could see the lights from the mansion glimmering through the foliage of the trees, I could see nothing distinctly. Vermodi must have been familiar with the place, as he appeared quite at home in the park.

As we moved away from the gate, along the

graveled driveway, I heard some one rap noisily and demand admittance. The porter seemed indisposed to admit the newcomer, who seemed to be afoot, but after passing him through a rigid cross examination, the ponderous bolt was drawn aside and the pedaneous guest entered. This confirmed my suspicions and aroused my curiosity. What sort of a place had we entered? Was it a place of amusement into which Vermodi had lead me? Had he taken me out on a frolic and stole past the gate-keeper? I knew too well that these internal questions were not seriously put and that I was endeavoring to deceive myself. I asked Vermodi no questions and after a brisk walk, arrived at a broad flight of stone steps leading to the door, which stood open and the light, streaming out, spread a welcome glare over the surrounding trees. Passing through the hall, we were ushered into a brilliantly lighted salon, where the guests were assembled.

As our names were announced, many faces were turned in recognition toward Vermodi and I detected several puzzled, questioning glances, directed toward me.

The gaudy costumes and brilliant lights dazed me. For a moment I was unable to speak, then realizing my position, I courteously greeted a gentleman Vermodi was introducing to me. I

was ashamed of my momentary embarrassment, but it is to be excused, when my year's recluse is remembered.

I had before seen brighter and more dazzling scenes, but had never been similarly affected.

There were many ladies present, and I wondered why Vermodi had not presented me to some of them, or at least to the hostess. While leisurely strolling through the salon, I noticed that the costumes, which seemed so gorgeous on entering, were well worn, and some seemed almost threadbare. The faces of many of the guests were worn and anxious, though an air of warmth and gaiety was affected which was oppressive, even painful to me.

“You will like them when you know them better,” remarked Vermodi, uneasily, not understanding the interest I manifested.

“I think I shall,” I returned, staring blankly at the unprepossessing assemblage, “but tell me, Vermodi, who is that beautiful girl across the salon — the one clad in black?”

Glancing in the direction I indicated, he hesitated a moment, then replied:

“That is my sister; come, let me introduce you to her.”

Crossing the floor, I had the pleasure of an introduction to the most beautiful woman I ever

met, before or since that evening.

Mortal pen, with the combined vocabularies of all languages — much less my pointless pencil — could not describe her many charms and do them justice. Take my description, then, and multiply it with not less than one-thousand, and you can draw something near a correct conclusion as to her beauty.

Arising to meet me, her stately form was displayed in its elegant perfection. She was not one of the pale, dough-faced, “aristocratic” creatures, who pose as society leaders, but was strong and full of the inexplicable charm of health and vivacious spirits. Her face was, it is true, devoid of color, but the skin was soft, white and smooth, while the masses of dark hair, combed back from her forehead, fell in glossy ringlets about her shoulders, gleaming in the yellow rays of the waxen tapers in the chandeliers. She was, indeed, beautiful, though her womanly charms were offset by cold, gray eyes, and firm, regular features, which gave her an expression not unlike her brother's.

Involuntarily I compared her to my little friend at the inn, coming to the mental conclusion that such a comparison was next to sacrilege.

After going through the formalities of an introduction, I was about to seat myself beside

Senorita Vermodi, when, glancing anxiously toward an elderly lady seated near us, Captain Vermodi suddenly exclaimed:

“But a thousand pardons —”

He was interrupted by Madona, who, with more tact than her brother, presented me ceremoniously to the old lady, whom she addressed as Dona Burguana. The captain's relief was evident — for the old lady had been eyeing me in an unfriendly and suspicious manner—and he remarked by way of appeasing the old lady, I suppose, for she had greeted me coldly:

“He is an American gentleman of high connections and in sympathy with the right cause.”

I made no effort to deny the allegation, because a denial would have created the impression that I favored the wrong cause — whatever it was — which my vanity would not let me endure, although I fully understood his meaning; but Dona Burguana gave me no opportunity to refute the assertion, even had I intended doing so.

Her expression immediately changed, and she launched forth into an elaborate disquisition on the advantages of the former colonial government under Spain. Having seated myself, I listened to Dona Burguana with patience, if not with resignation, and as her adjectives diminished in fluency and became more meaningless, I antici-

pated, with keen pleasure, her speedy silence, but met with disappointment. She was flagging for want of breath only, as her reservoir of loyalty and—ideas was inexhaustible. Persons born in very high stations in life greatly resemble the humblest classes of people in their rugged indifference to conventionalities and lack of affectation. It is only the people in less assured social positions, or the recently elevated, who are always guarded in their deportment and studiously observe the rules of etiquette and jealously guard the dignity of their stations in life. Unconsciously, Dona Burguana continued, with the garrulity of a market woman :

“ Yes, the martyred king — or nearly so — the glorious Ferdinand, will claim his rights some day and the rebellious clowns will then repent having taken up arms against their lawful sovereign and murdered his representatives in Mexico ; I will see the day when this will come to pass ; you will have an opportunity to draw your sword, to serve gloriously for him from whom a contemptuous kick should be deemed an honor by all loyal subjects. The world is weary of Frenchmen and traitors. Our king of Spain, of Mexico and of South America is to have his own. See, all these noble gentlemen are bound, body and soul, to this grand enterprise ; they

glory in it, and well they may.”

Overcome by this loyal effort, Dona Burguana sank back in her chair, and I immediately utilized the brief period of silence by entering into conversation with the fair senorita, whose eyes sparkled as though she appreciated the humor of the situation and enjoyed it thoroughly.

Those eyes! How dared I say that such orbs were cold and gray. They were soft, dark, expressive, and in their depths I read my fate. Our conversation was commonplace. Why should it have been otherwise?

Not knowing how to open the conversation more quickly, and dreading Dona Burguana's speedy recovery of the powers of speech, I asked, with more diffidence than I care to confess:

“Is not life in Vera Cruz rather dull?”

“Ah, no,” she replied, in a voice that seemed to sound from fairyland, “I have lived here all my life and could not find it dull.”

“I thought, perhaps, the unstable condition of the government might seriously affect the social world.”

“It is true, we are not as rich as we once were, owing to the revolution, and the many political changes since that deplorable event, but that does not prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Is the city of Mexico dull now? I always

thought it very gay. Does the presence of so many soldiers at the capital frighten the people there out of all enjoyment? Col. Iturbide must be a very bad man, or he would not be doubly a traitor."

"No, the capital is always full of light and merriment. The people there seem insatiable in their craving for pleasure, and there are thousands of means of divertisement. In the capital, less attention is paid to politics than in the provinces, except by the soldiers and politicians, a few patriots, and members of the royalist faction. But I like Vera Cruz better than the capital," here I threw a little expression in my voice, though not enough to alarm or offend the senorita, "I know few people here, but those with whom I am fortunate enough to be acquainted, have my warmest friendship."

I was thinking of only Nama and Madona, the robust and refined beauties of my very limited acquaintance. Both were beautiful, though of very different types of beauty. Their stations in life were as opposite as their charms. One appealed to my animal nature, the other to my intellectual craving for something pure and refined. One had to combat my vanity and now, my disdain, while the other must be won. She must stoop to love me and ah! how much more

attractive was the gallant fight for the eagle than the quiet possession of the poor dove caught in a trap.

My words amused Madona, for she understood their meaning, but she was not the kind of woman to carry on a coarse flirtation.

“Indeed,” she said, “then it is fortunate for you that you like the place so well, as I am told that your regiment is to remain here all winter.”

I had hoped for my words to elicit a few coquettish remarks and was disappointed by her reply. As I raised my eyes, having cast them down to conceal my vexation, I again became aware of the presence of Dona Burguana. She was watching us with marked disapproval.

“Pardon, senor,” she said, rising as she spoke, “but it is time Madona and I were departing.”

“Will we meet again, senorita,” I asked, as Madona arose to accompany her chaperone, hoping to receive an invitation to call.

“I hope that we may,” she replied, with the studied simplicity with which a woman can parry the most pertinent question, and I noticed a slight shadow pass over her face. I dared not press the matter further. As she turned to join her companion, she smiled to me — not the smile of a coquette, but that of a beautiful woman,

who is sure of her charms and disdains the conquests, which make older and less attractive women happy. I watched her until she left the room, and then turned to an open window to await the time when Vermodi would see me safely from the place.

CHAPTER VII.

Without appearing to do so, I occupied my time observing the guests present. There were stately old men; stout, matronly women; young people, who seemed oppressed by a weight of care which they could not throw off and others, who seemed oblivious to the distress pictured on the faces of their associates and seemed to enjoy themselves with zest.

Some of those present were marked by a haughty, half defiant carriage, as they moved about the salon; others, not so bold, were silent and reflective, while some moved about with pale, downcast faces, as though anxious to avoid observation, obviously fearful of some danger that I could only suspect.

“So these are the bold, plotting Bourbonists,” I muttered, almost in contempt, “and this is the manner in which they carry on their intrigues.”

Suddenly, a dead hush passed over the salon.

Listening attentively, to ascertain the cause of the silence, I heard the steady tramp of infantry soldiers advancing toward the house, along the graveled walks. Now and then a sharp word of command was uttered, which, with the occasional rattle of the officers' scabbards, as the advanc-

ing troop drew near, spread consternation among the guests present.

It would prove my ruin to be found in a house crowded with conspirators, and I looked around for some means of escape.

The window, by which I stood, opened on a small balcony and I sprang through it. As I was on the point of lowering myself to the ground from the balcony, I saw the soldiers advancing directly toward me and drew back behind the shutters. When the troop passed around the house, I hastily threw myself from the balcony and, finding myself clear of the house, ran without looking back, until I reached the friendly shadow of the trees in the park.

Then, hiding myself among some bushes, I looked back toward the scene of action. I was almost overcome by my terror, because all my hopes and prospects — perhaps, my life — were at stake and I trembled.

The soldiers had surrounded the mansion and a squad entered, to ascertain the cause of the gathering, or make arrests.

At that time, very close watch was kept on assemblages of citizens, of a social nature or otherwise.

For a short time, all remained quiet about the building; the soldiers on duty outside walked

alertly about the different entrances and beneath the windows and manifested deep interest in the proceedings inside. Soon they gathered together as though to prepare for an attack.

“Perhaps,” thought I, “an absence of tact in answering the officers’ queries has precipitated an encounter.”

Just at this interesting point, the lights in the salon were extinguished and the darkness prevented me from seeing more.

Several shots were fired; women screamed, and loud, angry voices could be heard, but these sounds soon ceased and the silence ensuing became almost unendurable.

A thick smoke finally became outlined on the sky, but gradually gave way to flames and I realized that the stately old mansion was burning—probably fired by some of the royalists themselves, though it proved fatal to their chances of escape, as the flames illuminated the park as bright as day and attracted the attention of the whole city. Drums were beat, bells rung—soon the whole military in garrison at Vera Cruz would be on the scene, and I looked around to see if my hiding place had been discovered. I saw only a few other persons crouching among the bushes near me. They glared at me with gleaming, murderous eyes and, thinking me a

member of the attacking party, they rushed upon me.

I saw the flash of their stillettoes in the glare of the light, heard them curse me with mortal bitterness, then knew no more.

CHAPTER VIII.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in my room at the tavern. Seated beside my bed was Nama, watching me attentively. When I opened my eyes, her joy was rapturous, judging from her expressions of delight.

Glancing toward the darkened windows, I saw the faint rays of an evening sun shining through a chink in the shutters.

“How long have I been here, Nama,” I asked, rising to a sitting position with difficulty.

“Since last night, Carlos.”

She always called me Carlos.

“Who brought me here?”

“I do not know. It was dark when they came and I did not see their faces. When they rapped on the door, they only waited until some one answered, then hurried away. I was frightened at first, as I thought you had been murdered, but,” she continued, patting my cheek affectionately with her chubby little hand, “you are still alive to love your naughty sweetheart,” lowering her voice and glancing toward the door.

I attempted to smile, but feeling a sharp pain in the temple, I fell back upon the pillow.

Nama became very anxious at once, but recov-

ering myself I assured her that it was nothing serious, then asked what time it was.

“It is almost half past two,” she said.

“How am I injured? What is the matter with me?” I asked, almost pettishly, the pain increasing.

“You was struck on the head by some one and knocked senseless. Don’t feel worried; the doctor says your injuries are not dangerous.”

“Has any one called to see me?”

“Yes, a lot of soldiers were here. The Captain came up to see you.”

“An arresting squad!”

Springing from the bed, I would have fallen to the floor had not Nama caught me in her strong arms, and steadied me until I had recovered sufficiently to stand alone.

“Arrest you,” she cried. “No, no, they shall not do it—you have done nothing!”

“I must dress and will go to headquarters immediately,” I exclaimed, then, as she clung to me despairingly I assured her of my immediate return. Greatly relieved, she left the room; and hurriedly dressing, I rushed from the house.

Hoping to avoid arrest until I could see my colonel, I slipped through narrow alleyways and unfrequented streets. Arriving at the barracks, I entered Col. Martine’s office, where that efficient officer was engaged in the heavy mental and

physical labor of attending to his pimples. He was so engrossed by this occupation, that he failed to notice my entering until I noisily drew a chair to his table.

“Ah, lieutenant,” he said, calmly looking up at me, “you are here, are you? I understood that you was badly wounded about the head.”

“The wound was not of much consequence, I assure you,” I answered in a very-much-obliged-to-you tone of voice, hoping to appease the Colonel’s impending wrath, though his continued calmness was no good omen. “I have come to report my unexcused absence from roll call, this morning.”

“Indeed? well, proceed.”

I then told him of my night’s adventure, hiding nothing, nor creating extenuating circumstances.”

“You say that you accompanied Vermodi, knowing that you were committing treason,” asked the colonel, with a malicious snarl. I do not believe he ever liked me, and he was glad, I have no doubt, to have an opportunity to call my conduct into question, a thing that had never happened before.

Greatly mortified, I answered with as much humility as I could command.

“I knew him to be a Bourbon royalist and

that he was taking me to a gathering of such people on a purely social occasion."

Col. Martine shrugged his shoulders at this, and looked incredulous.

"Senor," said he, with re-assuring familiarity, "you are well acquainted with the rebels — that is very good. Now, I am going to send you to them with despatches, that is, verbal ones. You are probably aware of the fact that young Vermodi escaped last night, with several others, and has raised the standard of revolt at, or near, Poor Sinner's Cross, on the road leading to the Capitol. A number of ignorant peasants have joined him, though they are unacquainted with the cause of the trouble and think, no doubt, that they are aiding in an effort to restore the republic."

"I did not know this before," I exclaimed, angry at his assurance of my guilt.

"Very well, that's all right," he continued, impatient at the interruption. "As I was saying, you can go to the rebel leaders and explain, that if they will renounce their foolish plan of supporting the Bourbon despots, to-morrow morning, when I march from Vera Cruz to attack them, we can join forces, return to the city, declare Iturbide's rule at an end, and in due time restore the fallen republic. If they refuse this proposition, they will suffer the penalty. Come, we must

see General Santa Anna before you start, the governor may have something to say to you, —come.”

Leaving the barracks we passed along the streets in the direction of the governor's palace.

We had not gone far when we were joined by several other officers bent in the same direction.

The streets were narrow, and the doors open directly upon them. There were no sidewalks, so the pedestrians accommodated themselves wherever they could find a dry place, as the slops and refuse were unceremoniously dumped into the streets.

Picking our way carefully along, we arrived opposite a small chapel, midway between the barracks and the palace, on the Calle del Yodo.

At the door stood a priest, who accosted us, asking for Colonel Martine. The valiant Colonel stepped forward to claim the honor.

“Come into the chapel,” said the supposed father, “I desire to speak to you a moment.”

“I am in a great hurry,” answered the officer, “will not an hour hence do just as well.”

“What I have to say is important; but suit yourself,” returned the priest.

The Colonel said no more. As he entered the chapel, the door was hurriedly closed behind him. While waiting on the outside, we heard angry

voices in hot dispute, then the sound of scuffling. Supposing that violence was being done Colonel Martine, I attempted to open the chapel door, but it had been barred.

“Gentlemen,” I exclaimed, “Colonel Martine is being murdered, we must do something to assist him!”

Then rushing against the door with our combined force, we tore it off its hinges and entered the church.

On the floor, close to the door, lay the prostrate form of Colonel Martine. A thin stream of blood oozed from a wound beneath his thick military jacket, forming pools in the declivities as it spread over the floor.

Horrified, we delayed making a search for the murderers, and when we looked for his assailants found the chapel deserted.

A door, at the rear of the place, stood open, and through this the assassins must have made their exit.

Pursuit was out of the question, we would not know the guilty ones, even though we were to overtake them.

Knowing full well the sure and deadly work of the stiletto in the hands of a Mexican, I felt convinced that Colonel Martine was beyond succor, but returning to where he lay, I bent over

the prostrate form, to determine whether life was yet extinct, my companions watching me with deep interest.

After a hasty examination, I raised my head and looked around mournfully as I said :

“Alas, he is dead !”

For a moment after this declaration, great excitement prevailed.

When order was at last restored, and the Mexicans had concluded their elaborate vows of vengeance—which they had no intention of fulfilling—I remarked rather contemptuously :

“Now, gentlemen, if your oaths will permit you, we will do something for the dead soldier. If Lieutenant Gura will procure a conveyance to remove the body from this place, some one else can notify the police and inform General Santa Anna.”

As I mentioned this last duty, every man started, eager to perform a mission which would command the governor’s attention, and perhaps attract it to the bearer of the information.

Almost forgetting my surroundings, I could scarce restrain a laugh, when I saw them debate as to who should bear the message.

It finally ended in selecting the senior officer present, the major of my regiment.

Wrapping the stiffening form of the colonel in

my cloak, I placed him against the wall, out of the accumulated blood.

For an hour we awaited Gurā's return with the conveyance, but not a sound disturbed the stillness of the almost deserted streets.

The oppressive silence of the chapel was wearing, and thoroughly worn out, we decided to send another officer for another vehicle, when the long-delayed coach arrived, filled with a bevy of excited officers. Placing the corpse in the coach, we returned to the barracks.

After performing all the duties devolving upon me as a fellow officer of the murdered Colonel, I had an opportunity to return to my apartments.

Walking rapidly in the direction of the tavern, I remembered my engagement with Nama and when I reached the enclosure surrounding the garden I sprang over it.

Nama was standing just outside of a small arbor, and seemed inspecting the plants with extraordinary interest, for a young lady of her careless, jaunty disposition.

An occasional glance toward the house, however, indicated that there was something on her mind besides gardening.

She was probably anticipating my approach from the tavern, or was fearful lest a watchful relative was on the alert.

Stealing noiselessly up behind her I caught the surprised lass in my arms.

Turning her startled face toward me, she did not seem at all inclined to scream or part company, upon learning whom her assailant was.

Strolling through the garden, hidden from observation by the increasing gloom, we talked of that which was uppermost in our minds—love.

She had met very few people, although her life had been spent in a tavern, and her ideas of love and, in fact, everything else, were odd.

She existed in a region of dreams, and a reality colored and brightened by the visions of her imagination. Suddenly drawing herself away from me, she softly said:

“I must leave you now, Carlos.”

I could not understand her haste to depart, having seen nothing more disturbing than a flash of light from the side door when it had been opened and immediately closed again.

“Stay a minute longer, darling,” I pleaded, unwilling for her to leave me that moment.

She hesitated, then seated herself upon the grass beside me.

Stolen sweets are sweetest of all, yet it was humiliating to meet a plain tavern girl, more beautiful and fascinating than most of her kind it is true, in a kitchen garden, down among the

cabbages and beets.

Had she been a "lady," the intrigue would have been more to my liking.

I would have preferred a scented note, fixing the appointment in the shadowy orchard, behind some stately old pile.

If the lady were lofty and proud, though still a woman, loving and passionate, I would fight and slay anyone daring to intrude upon us.

Knotty old orchard trees; beans, peas and carrots!

Imagination rises superior to circumstances, however, and I began to woo Nama as I would a haughty duchess. This pleased her, and she essayed to assume the airs and graces of the character she had affected, with a bewitchingly ludicrous effect.

In the midst of our merriment, a deep, harsh voice from behind us exclaimed:

"Ha, senor, I will relieve you of that lady!"

Startled, while making a declaration of eternal love, I turned to see who the intruder was.

A tall, well-proportioned young Mexican stood near me, glowering with passion.

"You will find that less easily done, than said," I retorted, assuming a defensive attitude.

"I will see you again for this," answered the Mexican, then turning to Nama he continued:

“Come, foolish girl, come with me!”

“It is my brother, Juan—I must go,” whispered the trembling girl.

“If you wish to return to the house, I will conduct you thither,” I replied, haughtily, “but I will allow no one to impudently take you from me.”

“Senor seems willing to answer for his words,” hissed Juan between his curling lips, which had assumed the diabolical smile peculiar to an enraged Spaniard.

“Rest assured, I am always at your service,” I answered, taking Nama’s arm and walking away.

The frightened girl clung to my arm, too much excited and overwrought to speak, yet I could see that she was glad of what I had done.

I was now her protector as well as her lover. Juan followed us to the house, where I bade Nama good night and retired to my room.

“Now,” thought I, “I must fight brother Juan, or marry Nama, and I really don’t know which alternative is the worse!”

Upon retiring to my room, I had determined to give this question my gravest consideration, but in the excitement of finding a captain’s commission lying upon my desk, my delight obscured more important matters.

Juan and his dagger, Nama and her charms, were alike forgotten, and my at most extinguished

faculty of dreaming was plied with renewed vigor.

“Now,” I joyously reflected, “my tardy fortune begins to assert itself—I *may* be great some day. Who knows where, after this, my promotion will end?”

Gradually, my thoughts, wandering from the future, turned to the past: I saw myself, a great, awkward, ambitious boy, receiving my first impressions of life. I had quarreled with a companion larger than myself.

Of course, words were succeeded by blows, and I received a sound thrashing.

Picking myself mournfully up from the ground, I bitterly muttered:

“And this is life!”

It was my first defeat, yet what has followed my boyish discomfiture!

CHAPTER IX.

I was so absorbed in these reflections that I failed to notice a sharp rap at the door, nor did I realize that I was not alone until a hand was placed upon my shoulder, and a soft, almost womanish voice spoke:

“Awaken, senor, I desire to speak with you.”

I sprang from my chair.

A glance at my visitor told me that I was in the presence of General Santa Anna, the governor, and I became very much confused. My confusion increased as he did not break the silence for a few moments, but seemed studying my face.

Attempting to make some sort of apology and failing, I relapsed into silence, patiently waiting for the general to speak.

“This is Captain Benjamin, I presume,” he said, after a long pause.

“Yes, your excellency.”

“Well, Captain, have your troop out at dawn in the morning. You were in the confidence of the late Colonel Martine, therefore follow out his plans. The rebels are less numerous than I was first informed. One troop can do the work if properly handled. If you return, allow anyone to join you who desires to do so, and treat them

all with courtesy.”

“I will obey your orders.”

An avowal of ignorance would have landed me in the military prison, so I wisely kept the truth to myself, determined to use the little information I had to the best advantage.

“Do so, and I will not soon forget you,” answered Santa Anna, pleased by my manner. “Iturbide, once a persecutor, is now a tyrant, and the yoke of his despotism is too heavy to be borne—we must throw it off.”

With this, the patriot, drawing the loose folds of his long military cloak about him, turned abruptly and left the room.

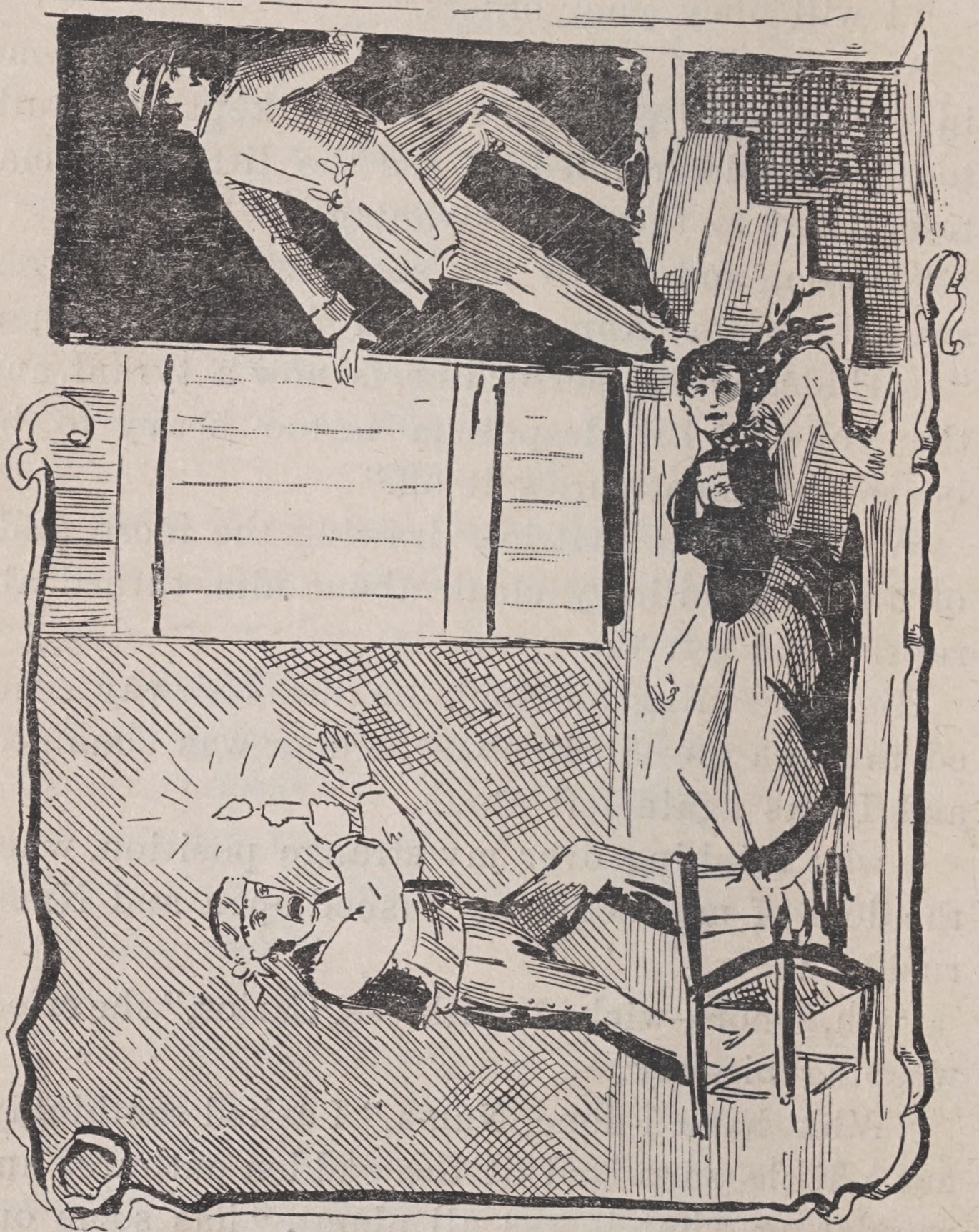
His descending footsteps on the stairway echoed through the silent house, a door was slammed, and I was again left alone.

I was thinking over my strange position, when the door of my room was pushed open and Nama rushed in.

“Oh, senor—wicked, faithless, Carlos,” she cried, weeping bitterly.

“What have I done, Nama,” I asked soothingly, not a little surprised at the sudden outburst and wondering what it was all about, “has some one said wicked things about me; I, who have always loved you?”

“No, no, senor,” she answered mournfully, “it



is not that—but, but, there's a lady down stairs—who wants to see you!”

“Is that all! who is she, Nama?” I asked, trying to appear unconcerned, but knowing there was but one woman in Vera Cruz, who knew me outside of the females about the inn—yet she was beautiful and cruel enough to break poor Nama's heart. “I know no lady here—perhaps she wishes to see me on business—desire her to enter.”

“I told her to go away and not come around tampering with a respectable girl's betrothed. She is down stairs talking with dame Isabella.”

At that moment Madona entered.

How beautiful she looked in a black gown and a large black hat, with plumes. She was a brunette, but not at all dusky, and black was very becoming to her. It would take greater talent than mine to describe her appearance.

I would have hurried forward to meet her, but was deterred by the pained look which swept across Nama's face, as she detected the motion. Behind the visitor hobbled dame Isabella, who watched us with her piercing black eyes, as though expecting a tableau, but finding disappointment, she turned to leave, saying to Nama, as she pointed significantly at Madona.

“Come away, Nama, this is no place for you.”

How annoying it was to have the people of the inn intruding themselves upon me, and insulting my visitor; I could have cursed with chagrin.

Nama, not heeding the old woman, stood in the doorway, her eyes filling with jealous tears, and her fingers nervously pulling at her apron.

Unconscious of her intrusion, she watched her rival, until Madona impatiently exclaimed:

“Close the door and retire, young woman!”

Giving her enemy a look of bitter hatred, such as a Mexican girl is alone capable of nurturing, Nama left the room. That passion was to consume her! She ruined her own happiness, not I!

Madona's look of amused contempt did not change as she turned to me and said:

“Senor, this visit undoubtedly surprises you, but I assure you it is the call of necessity which dictates this indelicacy.”

“Senorita may feel assured that I do not think at all,” I gallantly replied.

“I thank you, senor,” she returned, graciously, “but I am in trouble, will you assist me?”

“At any sacrifice—ever!”

I had forgotten Nama—who was, probably, listening at the key-hole—until a more convenient moment.

“Your task is easily executed—tell me where my brother has gone.”

I immediately told her all I knew of the matter, divulging the secret of the proposed attack on the following morning.

“You will promise not to injure my brother if he is taken to-morrow.” She asked this eagerly, then attempted to smile

“If your brother is captured to-morrow,” I answered, feeling a certain degree of importance, “he will have no cause to complain of my treatment.”

“Thank you, senor,” she gratefully replied, “but I must not remain here long, as Dona Burguana might miss me and become scandalized at my absence.”

She was a bold girl, as her conduct indicated, and yet she commanded respect and admiration.

After conversing a few moments, she turned to depart. I accompanied her to the street door, where a sedan awaited her. Hastily bidding me adieu, she seated herself in the chair, and motioned the bearers to proceed.

Returning to my room, my heart overflowing with a passion that I dared not make known, I sat until my emotion had sufficiently subsided to retire, then tossed about in bed until past midnight, thinking of Madona and the future opened before me.

Then, finding it impossible to go to sleep, I

arose and after throwing a mantle across my shoulders, sat by the table to await the coming of dawn.

The faint rays of the tallow candle fell upon the pages of an open book, resting in my lap, but my mind had wandered far into the region of misty dreams.

As I sat there, the door creaked and I suddenly came to a realization of my surroundings.

It was not Juan who entered, however. The vision that I saw was not at all war-like. It was Nama!

She was clad in a short night dress, and her arms and feet were bare.

She knew that she was doing wrong, but she would not control herself, poor child.

Finding me awake, she rushed into my arms and did not leave me until the first gray streaks of light heralded the approach of day.

CHAPTER X.

After disposing of a hearty breakfast, I mounted my horse at the tavern door, and started toward the barracks. Glancing carelessly over my shoulder, I saw Nama's tear-stained face at the lattice of one of the windows of an apartment on the second floor. She was looking anxiously after me, as though she felt a presage of the events which were to follow.

Touched with compassion for the poor child, I rode back and, halting beneath the window, called to her. Pleased by this attention, she opened the casement and looked out, to bid me a smiling good-bye, tossing me a rose-bud at the same time. I had hardly caught the flower, when the lattice was violently closed, and I heard Nama sobbing within.

Angry at the treatment she had received from her intemperate brother, or uncle, I exclaimed:

“Farewell, Nama, darling, I will soon return to you. Angry brothers shall not part us, when I return.”

A derisive laugh greeted these words and in my rage I would have dismounted to resent the insult, but remembering my position, I restrained

myself and, putting spurs to my horse, rode away.

As I joined my troop, the officers, who had been so distant a short time previous, crowded around me with congratulations and friendly handshakes.

I scorned their friendship, for I knew very well that if I really needed it they would still be very distant.

This world was created for the successful, not the struggling and despairing!

After traveling for nearly two hours over the dry, dusty road, we arrived at Poor Sinner's Cross, finding there no indications of the rebels. Halting my company, I sent out spies, the only duty a Mexican can efficiently perform; who returned, after an interval, with the information that the enemy had fortified a ruined hacienda, several miles distant.

Leaving the road, we followed a narrow bridle-path through a dense growth of chapparel. Upon emerging from the thicket, a desolate looking group of buildings loomed up before us.

The hacienda had once been strong and imposing, but now the ruined walls and toppling towers indicated that the time of its usefulness had long since passed. The high, arched gateway, was piled with a barricade of fallen timber, and from the highest pinnacle fluttered the royal ensign of Spain.

Looking over the ruins with the air of a general, I came to the mental conclusion that the place was impregnable, but, like Napoleon, I could not leave the field in disgrace, and determined to hazard an attempt, no matter how disastrous the result, as I could not think of making an ignominious retreat without even having fired a musket.

Anyway, a few Mexicans driven to the slaughter could not be reckoned a loss.

The besieged were watching us from their fancied security behind the "ramparts" of their hastily constructed fort. To inspire them with the terror which an appearance of military stratagem is sure to elicit, as well as to make my own soldiers believe that I was an adept in the art of war, I ordered the company dismounted, and formed six divisions, or squads.

After sending five of these divisions to positions, not knowing nor caring whether they were of advantage, or the reverse, I addressed the remaining squad, calling it the forlorn hope.

Imitating the style and tone of Iturbide, I explained the honor of their duty and the certain glory awaiting success, or defeat, if they died valiantly facing the enemy to the last.

I then declared that any craven might retire who feared to "rush into the jaws of death." As

no one was cowardly, or bold enough, to claim this means of escaping the impending danger, I pointed toward the hacienda, and shouted:

“Follow me, we charge the gateway, to honor, or to death!”

With a wild cheer the Mexicans dashed toward the wide portal.

As we approached the gate, an old cannon, planted on the roof of the hacienda, by some short-sighted military genius, was discharged at us. The ball, falling wide of its mark, ploughed the ground, but the shock was immediate in its effect upon the dilapidated building.

A toppling tower fell, with a crash, crushing the roof, and destroying several of the walls.

During the excitement following the accident, I assaulted the collapsed fortress, in full force, entering without opposition.

Upon seeing my troopers pass over the barricades at the entrance, the rebels, recovering from their astonishment at the disaster, retreated to the interior of the hacienda, where they made their stand in a large, low-roofed, stone-paved hall, dimly lighted by narrow gothic windows.

Here, in a place that had, probably been used in former times on many festive occasions, took place a sanguinary hand-to-hand conflict, the simple, unadorned details of which are too horrible

to relate.

The place was dark and damp, and the combatants could hardly see each other as they fought.

Sabers had been abandoned and the deadly stiletto substituted.

I knew that the Mexicans were cruel and sanguinary, but I never thought they could fight so obstinately.

With their murderous daggers in their hands they become frenzied, and fight like human tigers, especially among themselves.

The dead and dying lay about unregarded and unattended. Each man felt the necessity of protecting himself, and had no time to assist a comrade.

During the combat, as I hastened from place to place, I was exposed to many dangers. I had received two wounds, but dared not retire.

Both sides were about evenly matched, and victory rested in personal bravery and alertness.

Philip Vermodi was among the rebels. I could see his pale, impassive face, behind the hedge of polished steel blades, and heard his firm voice encouraging and commanding.

I recognized several of the faces I had seen at the reception, among our antagonists, and was on the point of calling out for a cessation of hostil-

ities, when I felt a sudden giddiness, then a rush of blood from the head, and I relapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XI.

A slight breeze, blowing through the trees, rustled the leaves, as, recovering from unconsciousness, I stared about me bewilderedly.

In some unaccountable manner I had been removed from the ruined hacienda, and lay on a pile of dead leaves, under the shade of a tall forest tree.

I would have believed the whole affair a frightful dream, had not the blood, drying upon my face and hands, settled all such doubts.

An internal feeling of pain overcame me, and a burning sensation in the region of my wounds set my mind on fire.

For a short time, I was almost delirious, yet no one came to attend me.

At last, worn out by thirst and pain, I sank into a feverish slumber.

“The murder of Colonel Martine did us no good!”

I started, and opened my eyes.

Two men stood near me, engaged in earnest conversation. I recognized in one the priest who had been instrumental in the assassination of Colonel Martine. His companion was a small man, dressed in black. A dark fringe of beard fram-

ed his weak, though handsome face, leaving his mouth and chin exposed. He seemed to stand in considerable fear, or awe, of the swarthy priest, and avoided meeting his glance, by casting his crafty looking eyes to the ground.

“No,” answered the small man, raising his eyes and peering among the branches of the trees, as though he saw something highly interesting there, “No, I think you are right, it was an useless murder.”

“Murder, do you say,” exclaimed the priest, fiercely, as though bent upon picking a quarrel with his associate, “have I not absolved the perpetrators of the—absolved them?”

“That is what I meant,” replied the other, terrified by the priest’s demeanor, “I simply desired to say it was useless trouble.”

“Is the taking away of an enemy to the Pope and to Spain an useless trouble,” questioned the holy man, glaring angrily at the other, whose attention became concentrated in the interesting “something” above him. “Maybe you will think it ‘useless trouble’ to rid the country of that traitor and spy, Captain Benjamin.” The priest concluded with a sarcastic sneer.

“No, Benjamin should be shot! I remember his having accompanied Vermodi to our assembly on that unfortunate evening. It was he, perhaps,

who informed the authorities of the gathering.”

“Yes, and like a pack of fools you let him escape after you had him in your power only to head an expedition to ruin our cause and drive us to the mountains!”

“But we thought him a friend—Vermodi was heard to introduce him as such,” answered the attentive gaze, nervously.

“Well, that is all the worse for the poor, wayward man.”

I knew by the tone of the hypocrite’s voice and his attempt to assume a pious expression, that my death had been fully determined upon.

“Do you think the prisoner strong enough to escape?”

“Not with his wounds—come let us ascertain how Captain Vermodi is getting along.”

Not a little surprised at hearing myself spoken of as though in imminent danger of my life, I arose to a sitting position, with great difficulty, and took a view of the situation.

I had been lying with my head close to the roots of a large tree, which had obstructed my vision. Now, in the limited range my eyes were permitted, I could see nothing save the dark trunks of surrounding trees, forming an impenetrable barrier at a short distance. Overhead, through the branches of the trees, I could see the

blue sky, dotted with white clouds, made dazzling by the rays of a tropical sun.

“Senorita,” I heard the small man say, though I could not see him, because the trees intervened between us, “how is your brother?”

“I do not know,” answered a female voice, which I at once recognized as that of Madona, “he has been unconscious for some time.”

My heart almost stopped beating as I heard her speak. She had been near me for hours, perhaps and had manifested no interest in my welfare. Was she too heartless even to show a woman’s kindness to a wounded soldier. Thus, reasoning myself, I thought that she had not been made aware of my condition—perhaps she did not know of my capture.

“He will be better soon, I dare say,” remarked the priest reassuringly.

“I am glad you think so, Father Boniface,” answered Madona, “as I was feeling quite uneasy about him. He looked—Santa Maria, what is the matter? Oh, brother—Philip, speak!”

For a moment there was silence.

Forboding evil, I attempted to crawl from behind the tree, to learn what had happened. The agony of the movement threw me into a swoon, from which I recovered only to hear Madona’s screams and the priest’s words of consolation.

I understood it all then!

The excess of Madona's grief soon exhausted her, and passionate screams changed to low, piteous moans, more intense in their feeling.

I bitterly regretted having told her where to find Philip, but my meditations were abruptly ended; an old man approached. He was attended by two stout Indians, carrying a blanket between them.

"Do you feel able to bear a removal," queried the old man.

"I think that I will be able to walk, with the assistance of these men, senor," I answered, feeling desirous of looking around me, which I would be unable to do in a litter.

"I fear you will be unable to stand it," remarked my visitor, "however, you may try."

Lifting me to my feet, the burly descendants of the Aztecs carried me between them.

Directly behind the tree, which had proven a barrier to my curiosity, was another cot. Stopping my conductors, I looked down upon the lifeless form, swathed in bloody bandages, lying there. The bloodless face, the glazed eyes and nerveless jaws presented small resemblance to Philip Vermodi, whom I had seen a few days before in the pride of manly health and vigor.

"Come away," said my aged companion, touch-

ing me gently on the sleeve.

Not heeding him, I continued to gaze upon the face of the dead man. Some strange fascination held me there, and I could not tear away. My assistants, at a word from the old man, caught me by the arms and forcibly led me away.

In an open space among the trees, a short distance from me, stood a small stone cottage, apparently the abode of one who sought the seclusion of the forest, as there were no domestic offices. The forest towered about the bald spot on which the building stood, to dispel all surmises as to agricultural pursuits, and a narrow, and but slightly worn foot-path leading to the door, indicated that the place was not subjected to frequent visits from the outside world.

While I was speculating on these matters, we approached the house and I noticed that Madona was sitting in the shadow of the doorway, her head bent, and resting in her hands, the picture of sorrowing despondency.

As I approached, she raised her head and, recognizing me, asked if my wounds were less painful. Her eyes were red with weeping, her white skin looked yellow, and her hair straggled about in almost slovenly confusion, yet she still remained a beautiful woman.

“Senorita may feel assured that my wounds

are insignificant," I responded, seating myself on the stone threshold by her side, though this procedure did not receive my conductor's approbation. Then, after a pause, I asked:

"So you then feel some interest in my well-fare?"

I was looking into her eyes with great earnestness, then realizing the impropriety of a lover's complaint, just after the death of the brother of his mistress, I blushed with confusion.

The old man — my jailer, probably — left us, scowling fiercely as he went, as though he would have preferred to see us less cordial.

"I feel the interest in you, natural for me to entertain towards one who is seriously injured," answered Madona, with a certain degree of coldness which I attributed to the dignity of her character.

"It is kind of you to feel the most passing sympathy for me," I returned, almost as distantly as she.

"Senor, you are in danger," exclaimed Madona, abruptly, as though moved by some sudden impulse; "if you remain here your life will be taken."

"I know that, but how am I to escape, in my present condition?" I replied, looking at my blood-stained shirt, I am unable to move about

without pain, and if I left this place, it would be but to perish in the forest."

"You promised to do all you could for my brother, and I will do as much for you. Yes, you promised, yet what good did it do?"

"If I could have averted the calamity, I would have done so," I returned. "I would have done so to keep the dark cloud of grief from you, I would have done so through love of him!"

Her harshness disappeared at these words, and we conversed in an easy, natural way. We had been together a very short time when we perfected plans, as we supposed, for traveling to the capital, where her relatives resided.

"We will leave just as soon as I can get Major Victoria and Father Boniface to permit you to go. I will meet with opposition, and it may take some time to accomplish this."

My jailer appeared at this moment, apparently very much agitated, and taking me by the arm, he led me into the house.

Surprised by his strange actions, I expected some startling disclosure. When he had me safely in an inner room, he explained that "my bed was ready, whenever I desired to retire."

Angry at the way he had drawn me away from Madona, I would have returned, but found the door locked and escape impossible.

CHAPTER XII.

Seating myself upon a rickety stool I gave vent to several interjections, not calculated to inspire the devout with a regard for me, and then took a survey of the room.

The inner walls of the cottage were of hewn logs, loosely put together. The crevices between the logs remained undisturbed by the builders of the primitive structure, and a person in one room could hear all that transpired in the other parts of the house.

The furniture was scant. A small cot, in one corner, two stools, and a small table, on which an unlighted candle was placed, envoiced the entire contents of the room.

While I was gloomily wondering what was to be my fate, I heard voices in an adjoining room. I recognized Madona's voice, and confess that I listened attentively to discover the tenor of the conversation.

"I hope you do not intend to murder the young man!" I heard Madona exclaim, in an angry tone.

"If you will promise me one thing, I will do anything you say," answered the male voice, which proved to be that of Major Victoria.

“And what is your condition?”

“An easy one, at least to me! That you become my wife!”

“Senor, you are insolent,” cried Madona, haughtily, then regaining her composure she remarked icily: “Surely, this is a strange way to begin your suit!”

“You don’t expect me to free your lover, senorita, that he may place himself in my way, do you?”

“Really, senor, I—could anyone be in your way, regarding me?”

“Listen,” hissed her companion, “if you desire to save Captain Benjamin, comply with my conditions. If not, he dies!”

“Do not be too sure, senor, I may prevail upon Father Boniface to liberate Philip’s friend.”

“Father Boniface will never let him leave this place alive—not if he can help it. Come, I offer you the Captain’s life. Do you accept my terms.”

“Senor, I will not accept your offer, and beg that you leave me.”

“Ah!”

“Shall I summon some one to protect me from insult?”

“Come, hear me. You desire to go to the Capital?”

“Yes,” exclaimed Madona, with eagerness.

“As my wife, I will take you there—not otherwise!”

“We will not travel together then.”

“Senorita, do you know who you scoff at. See it is a Colonel at your feet. I have accepted a commission under the Emperor Augustine. In a few weeks I return with a regiment of regulars, to cleanse this country of its pestilence—the Bourbon royalists!”

“Beware, the Bourbon royalists can avenge treachery!”

“I leave in three days for the capital. By the time they know of my departure, I will be back among them with the troops.”

“Do you know, *Colonel* Victoria, that you have placed yourself in my power. Now promise to liberate Captain Benjamin—you dare not refuse.”

“I do refuse, and if you expose me, I will—kill you!”

“This is farcical, absurd! If you fail to consent to further Captain Benjamin’s escape by tomorrow night, I will disclose all you have unfolded to me to Father Boniface.”

“Traitress, you would ruin me!”

“You were pitiless.”

“Aye, and I can avenge!”

“I do not fear your threats, *senor*.”

“Woman, the time is near when you will learn

whether I threaten in vain. I would avenge myself now, but—”

“You fear to, I suppose,” cried Madona, with scorn. “Now, *senor*, I command you to leave me. Hesitate, and I will call *Senor Yarmada*—then, too, do not forget *Captain Benjamin* is near.”

At the mention of my name as a protector, a thrill of pleasure ran through me.

Could the proud, independent, Mexican girl, look to me for protection? Ah, how pleasant was that delusion—how many castles I built upon that thin surface! Happy the man who never dreams—his disappointments are few, and less hard to bear.

I had been so interested in the preceding dialogue, that I did not see *Senor Yarmada*, my jailor, standing beside me. He must have noiselessly entered and heard the entire conversation, for a sinister look stole over his countenance, as he turned to me and said:

“Say nothing about this and I will see that you are allowed to go your way in peace. You can accompany *Senorita Vermodi* to the capital, *Colonel Victoria* will follow you—I will furnish *the rest*.

“You mean that you will deceive *Colonel Vermodi*, assassinate him, and let me finish the errand you have given him, to blind him, and make

him more easily your prey?"

"I do," answered the old man, pleased at my readiness to understand him.

"Then I decline to act as an accomplice in a murder with you, an old man, nearer the grave than God, should abhor!"

"Peace, you insult one who could do you great injury if he desired to. I ask nothing of you — expect nothing of me!"

"If you could secure my release were I to consent to assist in a murder, your conscience, your honor, should make you do so if I decline to indirectly stain my hands with blood."

"From the appearance of your hands, at present," said senor Yarmada, satirically, "I infer that you have been more than indirectly concerned in the shedding of blood."

As he uttered these words, he left the apartment.

"Well, that settles it — I am going to die," I reflected, "here is my death-bed and this is one of the closing scenes. After this I will never believe that there is anything grand, or terrible, on earth — it is all flat, emotional life. Everything smells of clay! Here is Oliver Benjamin going to die the sublime death of a martyr, yet he is neither willing, nor ready. If all the glorious martyrs were in the same frame of mind, what

a lot of romance has been imposed upon me all my life!"

Two days passed, and still I remained in my room, seeing only the Indian woman who brought my meals.

The days dragged slowly along, and the longing for night only changed into a longing for day, as night closed about me.

On the morning of the third day, as I lay in bed, indulging in my usual sunrise meditation, the door opened, and my jailer entered.

"Get up," said he, "you are wanted outside."

"If you want me outside," I responded, imitating his surly tones, "wait until I feel disposed to come."

"It is for your own good; do as you like about it," he returned, slamming the door angrily.

At the words, "your own good," I sprang from my recumbent position as though electrified, and encased myself in a suit of civilian's clothing, which had been provided for me, then hurried, as fast as the stiffness resulting from my wounds would permit, from the house.

Major Victoria was standing at the door, Madonna by his side. She seemed to have forgotten their quarrel and was chatting with him unconcernedly as if nothing had happened. I wondered whether it were possible for Madonna, seemingly

so exalted above ordinary mortals, to aid in the murder of her companion, which I felt assured was meditated. Her conduct seemed to justify this suspicion, yet I thrust it aside, horrified at the idea.

“Are you able to walk three miles through the forest to the road,” queried Major Victoria, as I joined them.

“Yes senor, I can stand the trip,” I replied, with confidence.

“The roads are bad,” remarked the major, by way of discouragement, “the jostling of the diligence may prove too much for you, senor.”

“Have no fear, senor,” I responded, as Madona glanced encouragingly toward me, “my wounds will not inconvenience me.”

“Have your own way, senor,” exclaimed Victoria, in disgust.

“You may regret having insisted upon taking the trip, a man in your condition can be none too careful.”

“Come senor, let us be off,” interrupted Madona, suddenly; “if we tary here, the coach may pass before we reach the road.”

With this, she took my arm and following the doughty Major, who watched us with lowering brow, walked toward the path leading to the road. Our companion’s disapproval increased as we en-

gaged in a friendly chat, and leaving the post he had assumed, a few paces in advance of us, as guide, he walked to the other side of Madona.

After stumbling through a wild, unfrequented jungle, we arrived at the road, distinguishable as such by its being more rough and wasted than the surrounding land. Here we waited fully an hour for the irregular stage, and came to the conclusion that it had passed, when we heard the crack of the postillion's whip, as we were on the point of mournfully retiring. The loud rumble of the coach upon the rough road, indicating that it was very near, caused us to hurry precipitately back to the roadside.

Our shouts for the conveyance to stop, only increased the driver's desire to proceed, and belaboring the horses with all his energy the coach whirled past us.

Finding that we had not brought our firearms to bear, and that our appearance was amicable, the diligence waited at some distance, to accommodate us. After making elaborate and untruthful explanations to the guard, we were allowed seats in the conveyance.

The road passed through a dreary waste of uncultivated country, and the monotony of the journey was undisturbed, except by the occasional picturesque ruin of some prehistoric building, a

few dirty villages, and an occasional hacienda of by no means prosperous appearance.

In the villages where we changed horses, the inhabitants crowded around the coach, to admire and criticise, according to their varied tastes and humors at that moment.

As the sun was reluctantly sinking below the horizon, we entered a village, much larger than any we had previously passed through. A flag waved over the town, indicating that it was a military post, and it was with a throbbing heart that I heard the guard inform a fellow traveler that it was our stopping place for the night.

It was almost dark when we arrived at the tavern door, where the host was standing, with a light in his hand, awaiting us. We were ushered into a large apartment, where the table was spread, and the guests assembled.

“Seat yourselves, senors, and senora,” exclaimed the affable host, rubbing his hands, “take seats anywhere.”

“Landlord” I said, drawing the worthy host aside, “I desire private accommodations for that lady; your best.”

“Ha, a lady,” cried the host, becoming excited, “here Maria, Junata, — come, hasten, do not tarry. Lazy wenches, conduct this *lady*,” with decided emphasis, “to the second story front room and

see that she wants nothing.”

After the excitement attending escorting “the lady” to her apartment, had subsided, and the servants returned, I seated myself at the table, intending to obtain something to eat, as I was very hungry after our long ride and light luncheon.

While waiting for the repast, I glanced around the room.

Major Victoria was standing in a corner, engaged in earnest conversation with one of the serving men. The man shook his head and peered suspiciously about him.

Seeing my eyes bent upon them, he whispered something to the Major and left him.

I had no time to wonder at their behavior, as the street door opened at that moment and two soldiers entered.

Turning my head quickly, I hid my face in my hands, with my elbows leaning upon the table, hoping to avoid attracting the attention of the newcomers.

It was well that I did so. The officers, passing through the room, paused near me.

“Poor Benjamin,” I heard one say, “I fear that he has been foully dealt with.”

“Yes,” agreed the other, “I don’t doubt but that his bloody carrion is rotting in one of those

dark forests we passed through to-day. The rebels must have murdered him soon after the fight—this search is a foolish affair.”

“Benjamin was a good officer, I will never forget the way he stormed the fortified hacienda. He is undoubtedly a brilliant officer. Do you remember the manner in which he conducted himself when Colonel Martine was murdered?”

“Why, Gura,” exclaimed his companion, “I never supposed you were so enthusiastic! Benjamin was, perhaps, a good officer, but I never liked him. If he never turns up—why, old fellow, either you, or I, get his command, and—well, I don’t care if a mercenary dies every day, if it will further my promotion.”

“Come, Morelo, that sounds very mercenary itself,” said Gura, disgusted by the other’s selfishness, “that is not right for you to speak of a dead comrade that way. Benjamin never did you an injury. He treated you well, and it is unreasonable for you to dislike him.”

“Well, old boy,” returned Morelo, “we need not quarrel over such a small matter. I simply dislike Benjamin because Santa Anna seems to have taken such a violent fancy for him. If he had not disappeared, who knows what the General would not have done for him?”

“I am not jealous of Benjamin’s success,” an-

swered Gura, "for I know that I will attain the eminence for which I am qualified by attention to duty and honesty of purpose. If Benjamin is more talented, he will become greater than I, but if he is dead and out of the way, that is not a guarantee that I will succeed him."

"Come, come, old man," cried Morelo, with assumed nonchalance, "you make me think I am talking of my grandfather. Let us return to the barracks."

When they left the tavern I drew a long sigh of relief, as discovery meant disgrace, even death, after I had won a name for myself.

If it had not been for Madona, I would have returned to Vera Cruz, to follow Santa Anna's fortunes, but I could not leave the poor girl at the mercy of Major Victoria.

How different might have been my fate had I returned to Santa Anna—I might have become a great revolutionary chief; perhaps I would have made my name immortal.

But I could not turn back.

I had already sacrificed ambition at the altar of love, and hurried blindly on to my doom!

"The lady has been made comfortable," said the landlord approaching. "Did you come from Vera Cruz, senor? No? Then you did not hear of the battle with the insurgents there?"

“No, how did the battle terminate?”

“The rebels were defeated with great loss, nearly a thousand killed, I believe.”

“Did General Santa Anna command the successful troops,” I asked, amused at the information, and wishing to know whether I had obtained my full share of glory.

“Oh, no, a young captain named Benjamin had charge of our troops, and handled them like a veteran,” replied the communicative host.

“Indeed, the captain must be enjoying his honors now, I suppose General Santa Anna recognized the victory becomingly?”

“The captain is missing,” replied the wordy fellow; he was carried off by the rebels just as victory crowned his efforts, and he sank down on the grass covered with wounds. If he were here now, I dare say he would be wearing a colonel’s eagles.

At the mention of what might have been, tears started to my eyes, and it was with an effort that I controlled my emotion sufficiently to request the host to show me to my room. Even after retiring, I lay in bed, cursing tardy fortune, which had, after a year’s patient waiting, given me an opportunity to accomplish something, and then turn me from my triumph.

As I lay awake, the moonbeams, shining through



the trees before my windows, played upon the walls, forming flitting ghost-like shadows, and filling the dark corners with grinning assassins, whose white eyeballs and gleaming stilletos I fancied, I beheld.

My repeated failures to die wore me out and, forgetting daggers and goblins, I fell asleep.

The strain I had undergone was too great for my slumber to be deep. Several times, I half awoke at slight sounds about the inn, and I was just falling asleep after one of these frights, when a voice whispered in my ear, as a hand shook me:

“Captain, Captain Benjamin!”

I was becoming disgusted with myself, for the alarm caused by the moonbeams and, after awakening to find the room in darkness,—the candle having burned to the socket, or been extinguished,—I cursed myself for a coward, then thinking that I had been dreaming, thought no more of the matter and turned over.

“Are you awake,” the voice repeated, finding that I made no sound.

This time I was fully aroused and demanded what the intruder wanted.

“Not so loud, captain,” implored the voice, which I recognized as that of Major Victoria; “there are murderers in the house, I have just

escaped them, they are searching for me!"

"What have you done to have assassins follow you?"

A low laugh was the only response, then the door closed with a scarcely audible click, and I was left painfully uncertain whether I was alone, or with company.

As I listened, I heard the sound of scuffling in the hall, then a loud shriek, and the noise made by a heavy body falling down the stairway.

Hastily dressing myself, I ran out to ascertain the cause of the disturbance.

The landlord met me at the door and together we proceeded to investigate the mystery.

On the floor, near the foot of the stairway, lay the body of Major Victoria.

He was lying on his back, and his white, distorted visage stared up at us.

A wound in the breast, half hidden by the shirt he wore, which was stained with blood, told how he had come to his death.

Thrust in the still warm hand of the dead man, was a small piece of paper, bearing this inscription in Spanish: "The untrue." This convinced me as to the murderers.

No other traces were left by the assassins, who had escaped through the still open door.

"So you know the murdered gentlemen," quer-

ied the landlord with imperturbable composure.

“No,” I answered, knowing that an acquaintance would detain me, and might prove fatal to my prospects.

“You came in the same coach with him,” persisted the inn-keeper, whom experience had taught the immediate necessity of finding a friend for his deceased guests, “do you know a little about him—just a little?”

“I have never even had the pleasure of an acquaintance with the dead man, and know nothing of him—nothing,” I answered decisively, hoping to silence the host by my vehemence, knowing that I was no match for the crafty fellow.

“Pardon, senor,” said the host, humbly, as his diplomacy took another turn and he remembered that he had living patrons to cater to, “I simply desired to know.”

“Very well, I regret that I cannot give you some information; but what time is it?”

“Half-past four o’clock, senor.”

“The early diligence leaves at six?”

“It does, senor.”

“Then send someone to awaken the lady.”

“So early, senor?”

“Yes, we are in a great hurry.”

“I obey, senor.”

“Stay, order out a chaise, we can travel more quickly that way.”

“Are you in a very great hurry?” enquired the landlord, eyeing me with suspicious surprise.

“If I were not in a hurry, I would not desire to travel in haste.”

“Again I ask your pardon, senor.”

Retiring to my room, I soon completed my toilet, and descended to the main hall again, where I had not waited long when the servant maid sent to arouse Madona hastened back.

“Oh, senor,” she cried, with an appearance of great concern, though I could see by the look in her eye that she suspected an elopement, “senorita has disappeared — her room is vacant!”

“What,” I exclaimed, horrified at the idea, “is Madona gone?”

It was true! No trace remained of the missing senorita, and for an hour I rushed about the inn questioning everybody, without success.

Late in the morning, an Indian entered the small square before the tavern, with a load of wood.

Upon enquiring if he seen anything of the abducted girl, he told me that a rapidly driven carriage had passed him early in the morning, while on his way to town. He was not certain, but thought that he had seen a woman in the vehicle.

Waiting for nothing more definite, I sprang into my chaise, which was standing before the tavern door, and immediately started in pursuit of Madonna, whom, I felt assured had not departed upon her own accord, but was the victim of some bold conspiracy.

Calling to the postillion to make haste, I rolled out of the village, over which the Imperial banner still fluttered in the morning breezes, and was soon in the open country, tearing over the rough roads at break-neck speed.

CHAPTER XIII.

Toward evening, we arrived at a point on the road where a crowd of Indians were gathered around an overturned coach.

Hardly daring to hope that I had the good fortune of overtaking the vehicle which bore Madona away, and that she was near at hand, I asked :

“Have you seen anything of a lady, clad in a blue gown, rapidly driven in this direction?”

“A lady dressed in blue?”

“Yes, my good man,” I answered, turning to the speaker, and tossing him a few silver coins, —Senor Yarmada having provided me with ample funds for the journey.

“Did you see her? Which way did she go?”

“A gentleman, with a lady dressed in blue were in this coach when it overturned,” replied the Indian.

“Where did they go to seek shelter?”

Overjoyed at the accident which had overtaken the abductor, I felt sure of immediately effecting Madona's rescue.

“They did not stop, senor,” I was answered, “they continued their journey upon the coach horses.”

This certainly sounded as though Madona, after all was no reluctant prisoner.

“Jump in here and show us the way they went,” I cried, making room for him in the seat beside me, and motioning the driver to proceed.

As we drove away, the silent spectators gave a loud, parting yell of good will and encouragement.

After driving several miles, and finding no traces of the fugitives, I was about to dismiss my guide, when the driver suddenly drew up, as he exclaimed:

“Look, senor! Did you see the man look at us from the ruins, then quickly draw his head out of sight?”

“I saw him,” declared the guide, fearing that he sacrificed his reputation, by negligence.

Looking in the direction in which my attention had been called, I saw a mass of ancient architecture in crumbling ruins. From the appearance of the place, it could afford scant shelter from the elements, and could not have been a habitation. My first thought was naturally that Madona and her abductor were concealed in the ruins, which we would have passed unnoticed, had her companion controlled his curiosity.

Jumping from the conveyance, I ran toward the place, closely followed by my guide and the

driver. Upon entering the ruins we could see nothing of the person who had been indulging his curiosity, and, as the guide at once qualified his assertion, I began to think the man among the ruins was the creation of the vivid imagination of the driver, and a lack of veracity on the part of the guide.

“You must have been deceived,” I exclaimed with disappointment, turning to the driver, “there is no one here!”

A stifled cry, issuing from a pile of rubbish in a dark corner of the ruins, just then reached my ear, and I hurried in the direction from whence the sound escaped.

The cry was repeated as I clambered over the heaps of rubbish, behind which I found a small opening in the ground, which I took to be a dry well, or the entrance to a cellar.

“Hello,” I cried, peering down into the dark hole, “is there anyone down there?”

The cry was again repeated, and thoroughly convinced that I had found Madona, I sent the driver to get the straps on the harness of the chaise. He hurried off and soon returned with the straps, with which I lowered myself into the mysterious cavity.

Cautiously descending the rude ladder, I reached the bottom, and in groping about in the dark,

fell across a human form.

Reaching down to assist the prostrate person, my hands came in contact with a mass of soft hair. The touch, so magnetic in its influence, told me that Madona lay at my feet.

The joy this discovery gave me obscured all thought of her injured condition, and it was not until I had carried her to the chaise that I noticed the cuts and bruises on her face and hands.

I had no time to lose with her abductor, and immediately continued the journey, thankful that I had, perhaps, delivered Madona from a terrible death in that hole among the ruins.

As we were driving away, I looked back and saw a Mexican, of the mounted provincial police, talking to my guide, whom I had left behind me. After a few words had passed between them, the Mexican spurred his horse and galloped after us. Arriving in hailing distance, he shouted to us to halt.

“I am ordered to detain you, senor,” said he, stopping close to the chaise.

“You are mistaken, I am not the person you seek,” I answered, taking a doubloon from my pocket, and slipping it in his hand.

“Senor,” exclaimed the Mexican, with a great show of indignation, while weighing the coin in his hand.

Drawing two more doubloons from my pocket, I weighed them in my hand, as he was doing.

For a moment he eyed the money in a shrinking, suspicious manner, then stretching out his thin, yellow palm, he shrugged his shoulders, and said:

“You are right, senor, I am mistaken.”

Dropping the gold in his outstretched hand, I motioned the driver to proceed. That incorruptible gentleman had witnessed the transaction, as one who considered it a legitimate bargain, in which I had been cheated.

The contemptuous curl of his lips, as he cracked his whip, and muttered an inaudible something about “silver,” would have made another feel quite crestfallen.

Glancing toward Madona, I discovered that she had recovered from unconsciousness, and was looking around her in a confused, bewildered manner.

Seeing me she shrank away to the other side of the chaise, as though uncertain whether I was a protector, or a persecutor.

“You are safe, dear,” I whispered tenderly, “it is I, Carlos.”

Re-assured by my words and manner, she asked faintly:

“How came you to find me?”

“I have been following you all day, and at last

traced you to those ruins, where you were concealed," I answered, nodding toward the ancient building, which was fast disappearing in the haze of distance.

Then taking her hand, I asked:

"How was you taken from the inn, last night? Who was your abductor?"

"Late last night some one entered my room, which I had unguardedly left unfastened, and administered chloroform to me. The next thing I remember was being in a damp, vault-like place. I screamed for assistance, then became unconscious again."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"Major Victoria!"

"Well, Madona, I can tell you the rest. Major Victoria was murdered while wandering around the tavern in the dark, last night. In his hand, a little card marked, 'the untrue,' suggested that he had been untrue to his fellow-conspirators, and they had taken his life."

"A terrible vengeance, but it was just," returned Madona, her eyes glowing with gratification. What a strange woman she was! One to fear, or to love.

"You cannot conceive how terrible my emotion was when I found you gone. I was at most frantic," I exclaimed, putting my arm around her

slender waist and drawing her to me.

“Hush, Carlos,” she gently replied, “you may say something that you will regret.”

“Never, never,” I passionately cried.

I would have continued, had I not glanced toward the driver and found him struggling to keep his head in the proper direction, while a broad grin overspread his face, and he seemed to take a keen interest in the progress of the love affair.

Pressing her passive hand, I relapsed into silence — a period of pain to me, one of rest to Madona.

From that time on the journey became tedious and monotonous. By degrees, we arrived in sight of the Capital, and rolled across its streets.

“Where shall I take you, *senorita*,” I asked, as we neared the city.

“To my aunt, *Dona Vermodi*, *Calle del Venosa*,” she answered.

The residence of her aunt was a large mansion, built close to the street, like all Mexican city houses, and towering as high above the ground as the means of the builder would allow.

Stopping in front of this mansion, I assisted Madona to alight and accompanied her to the door, where she was cordially received by an elderly woman, clad in a flaming scarlet silk gown.

After the first affectionate greetings were exchanged, I was introduced to Dona Vermodi, who swept me a stately courtesy, and coldly passed into the house without uttering a word.

“I beg senor to accept my gratitude for his kindness to me,” said Madona, as, bowing coldly she followed her aunt.

Being left alone, I was somewhat mortified at the shabby treatment I had received, but attributing it to the customs of the country, I sprang into the chaise and drove off.

CHAPTER XIV.

“Captain Benjamin, from Vera Cruz!”

As the aid-de-camp called my name, I passed through the ante-chamber leading into the private cabinet of General Guerrero, and entered the presence of the great revolutionary chief, who was sitting at a desk, busily engaged sorting a mass of papers before him.

His modest deportment and unostentatious dress, so uncommon among Mexican soldiers, contrasted little with the furniture of the room, which was plain and simple.

I gazed wonderingly upon the man whom I had learned to look upon as almost perfect.

He could not have been more than forty years old, yet his care worn countenance and stooping shoulders were evidences of premature old age.

“I understand you have despatches for me from Vera Cruz, captain,” he said, rising as I entered.

“No, senor,” was my reply, “I have no despatches. I come to announce that General Santa Anna has declared his disaffection, and has raised the flag of the republic over the walls of Vera Cruz!”

“Thank God!” fervently cried the patriot, “I

knew it would come to that! Did Santa Anna send you to inform me of the revolution?"

"No, senor," I answered, seeing his expression turn from joy to stern displeasure as I spoke, "I came as an officer under the Emperor Augustine, not as a traitor to assist in the overthrow of a government, which I had sworn to maintain."

"Young man," came the harsh response, "there is no treachery in striking for liberty and the welfare of the people."

"Senor," I replied boldly, "the people enjoy as much liberty now as under a republic. You know that under a republican government in Mexico, the people only exchange an aristocratic master for a series of plebian tyrants!"

"Come, you have said enough. I will take you to Iturbide. You can tell him all you know, as I no longer fear his power to combat the revolutionary forces."

"Then you will let me warn the Emperor of his ——"

"Impending doom," finished the general, hastily, "Iturbide cannot struggle against republicans. Let him slay as many royalists as he chooses, but if he dares to send his troops against a body of patriots the whole nation would uprising against him!"

By this time, we had reached the Calle San

Francisco, and approached Iturbide's palace,—a large, profusely decorated building, opening directly upon the street.

After being announced, we waited until the Imperial plebian condescended to admit the noble republican, who had, through disinterested patriotism, placed in his hands the power which he had used so selfishly.

“Iturbide never treated me thus when we were colonels together,” exclaimed Guerrero, with great bitterness, as we waited in the ante-chamber.

“General Guerrero,” called an aid-de-camp, as a narrow pair of folding doors were thrown open.

Answering the summons, we followed the officer through the doorway, into a large room, draped in curtains of crimson velvet, drawn back by yellow silk ribbons, so as to display the large mirror panels of the walls.

At the end of this apartment was a dias and throne, on which the Emperor sat, looking about him with evident satisfaction.

A courtier, leaving him as we entered, presented an amusing figure as he backed the full length of the room, going through a series of gymnastics, at the same time, bordering upon the ridiculous.

As soon as Iturbide saw General Guerrero, he descended from the throne, and approached us.

“Ah, General,” he exclaimed, “what has brought you on this unusual visit?”

“This young officer desires to speak to you,” answered Guerrero, ignoring the Emperor’s cordiality; “when he has told you all he knows, you will look upon the future in a different light.”

“What have you to divulge, senor,” questioned Iturbide, in a calm tone of voice. “It must be something momentous if it concerns the future destiny of a monarch,—speak!”

I then explained Santa Anna’s disaffection.

Iturbide listened attentively throughout the recital, and when I had concluded, turned to General Guerrero.

“Guerrero,” he said, without visable emotion, “what do you think of this?”

“Your crown is in jeopardy!”

“It is true,” assented the Emperor sadly. “I have no friends to support my crumbling cause. The men who, a few days ago, vowed their eternal fidelity to me, after receiving all that I could bestow, now leave me, when they find my treasury empty and my power waning.”

“What you say is true of many,” answered Guerrero, deeply affected, “but it does not apply to the old revolutionary generals, who declined to recognize you as Emperor. Don Augustine Iturbide—I might say Colonel Iturbide, yet I hesi-

tate to trample upon a fallen monarch — when you reproach me for infidelity, for I suppose the reproach was meant for me, do not forget the concessions I have made to you in the past, and do not forget that I opposed your ambition — I protested against the creation of an empire. I will join the republicans to oppose, to overthrow your authority. Beware how you struggle against us !”

“ You mistake my meaning, Guerrero. It would be impossible to construe thy blunt manners into fawning courtesy. When I refer to the faithless, I cannot refer to those who have never made pledges of constancy.”

“ Your highness,” said I, feeling a deep sympathy for the fallen monarch, “ I, though an humble captain, will follow your cause to success or annihilation !”

“ The devotion of one man, though gratifying to me, cannot en vigor my hopeless cause,” answered Augustine, looking at me with the cold, penetrating glance of one who places little value in such declarations, “ when I am deposed, you will forget me and ride under the flag now waving above Vera Cruz,—they all do that !”

“ I have sheathed my sword, and no voice save thine can again command me draw,” I replied, so earnestly that the Emperor was moved.

“There may be a time when I will need you, ’till then, farewell!”

Detaching a small gold medal from his coat, he placed it on my breast, then turned to address one of the members of his suite standing a few paces behind him.

As we were leaving the palace, General Guerrero turned a displeased countenance toward me and asked:

“You do not actually intend to resign your commission, do you?”

“I have promised the emperor to do so, and I will never belie my word of honor,” I firmly replied.

“You made the promise in the heat of excitement,” returned the general, “consider the matter thoroughly before acting. You did some brilliant work in storming the hacienda and your promotion will be rapid if you remain in the army. I will see that General Santa Anna does not remember your late truant behavior.”

“Thank you, general, I will do as you advise and consider the matter.”

Leaving General Guerrero, I returned to my quarters, when I attempted to consider what course to pursue.

God, how many counter emotions struggled for the mastery! I had not decided what I should

do, when by thoughts, in a strangely natural manner, turned to Madona, and my prospects in that direction.

CHAPTER XV.

After I had been in the capital for more than a month, I had caught no more than a passing glimpse of Madona and her aunt, as they drove by me in an open carriage, one afternoon, as I was lounging on the plaza. She did not seem to see me.

The only token of remembrance I received from her during all this time, was an invitation to a ball, given at the residence of her aunt. I was surprised at this ungrateful coldness, but comforted myself with the hope that it was coquettish shyness on her part. I had called several times to see her, but after sending in my card was uniformly informed that Senorita Vermodi was not at home.

“To the ball, then,” thought I, “and demand an explanation!”

The music had just ceased, and the dancers were seating themselves, as I entered the ball-room.

Wandering through the crowd of gayly dressed men and women, I looked eagerly about for Madona.

She was standing beside her portly aunt, as I approached. She made an effort to pass me over

a few careless remarks, but I offered my arm and walked to a balcony, looking out on a small flower garden at the side of the house. Glancing back at the window as we passed out she remarked :

“This would suit Romeo and Juliet perfectly. Here there is no cause for complaint against the iron-barred windows of Mexico !”

I looked at her graceful form, clad in a gown of peculiarly soft, clinging texture, and the proud head, about which the dark locks were coiled. A bunch of roses was fastened in her hair forming a bewitching contrast to her brunette charms.

I was intensely agitated. Madona carelessly fanned herself, and leaned over the balustrade to look down into the garden, displaying a grace by the action, that no other woman possessed, I imagined.

But everyone thinks the woman he loves the fairest of all femininity ! Could such a lovely creature entertain any thoughts of me ? Alas, no !

“I do not complain of the iron-barred windows, but of the ladies They are too coy. Oh, Madona, you know my love for you ! Tell me, do I hope in vain ?

“Ah, senor,” she returned, the cool smile fading from her lips, “this is sudden, — this is indeed a mistake — we are scarcely acquainted !”

“Have you forgotten the journey from Vera Cruz so soon?” I cried, carried away by the fervor of my emotion. “Do you know that I threw away a future for you without thinking it a sacrifice? Ah, what a return for pure, unselfish love!”

“Hush, Carlos, do not talk so loud. You may be overheard,” she whispered, placing a small, white hand on my arm.

“I care nothing for the people here,” I answered, wildly; “all I want is you and—Madona hear me!”

She drew herself up scornfully as she asked: “Ah, senor, have you forgotten the little lass at the inn, who loved you so dearly? Return to her—I am unworthy of you.”

“Madona,” I urged, earnestly, “it is wrong for you to treat me thus,—you wound me deeply.”

“Poor Carlos,” she answered sadly, almost with regret, “we might have been happy together, but I cannot,—cannot be more than a friend to you now. Do not be angry, I did not mean to pain you so —farewell.”

I had no time to answer her. Quickly turning from me, she hurried away.

Amazed by her strange words, I stood for a moment staring blankly after her; then remembering my situation, I resolved to see her once

more before I despaired. I determined to know why could she be no more to me than a friend.

Again I saw Madona alone, her companion having left on some trifling errand she had imposed upon him.

“Madona,” I said, approaching her, “why do you treat me in this way? You have lead me to believe that you care something for me,—now, why should I—love in vain?”

“I had hoped our last conversation would terminate our acquaintance,” she answered, blushing with vexation, “but you insist,—ah, senor, you have returned at last!”

As her companion approached, she turned a firm, cold face to me and added:

“Let me present General Castelor, my husband, Captain Grey.”

Bowing low, I saluted her husband,—Madona’s husband,—and without displaying any of the emotions rankling within me, I left the room.

Turning at the doorway to take a last look at Madona, I saw her dancing with her husband and laughing merrily at something he was telling her.

Angry at the way she had forgotten me, and chagrined at my failure to win her, I hurried from the house.

The cold atmosphere of the streets relieved my

heated brain, and I was able to think.

Blighted hopes, a blank future were all that my mind could depict, and I mentally wandered through the ruins of the castle I had built during the brief space allowed me.

Every word, smile and gesture was recalled vividly to my memory, and I was surprised to see the weakness of the foundation on which I had rested such an immense structure of romance!

Becoming impatient upon recalling the contemptible part I had played, I exclaimed:

“She is an icy-hearted woman, despising such a dupe, driveller, idiot that I am! She is unworthy of me. Why should I concern myself about her?”

Yet I did concern myself about her, and resigned my commission in the army, fully believing that life to me was in the past, and that there was no future for me.

My dull, unhappy existence was not relieved by having friends to draw me away from the brooding gloom into which I had fallen, and I lived, with myself, in the past.

CHAPTER XVI.

Three months passed, and the dark cloud, which hung over my life, was clearing.

At nights, when I retired to bed, I would dream of Nama and her winning smile.

“It is nothing,” thought I, “I care nothing for Nama. True, she is pretty, but what of that? I do not love every good-looking girl I meet!”

As I roamed the plaza in the evening, the image of Nama danced before me.

As I watched the crowd of gaily dressed men and women stroll by, I could see Nama's bewitching black eyes flashing at me from behind every mantilla.

I thought that I was growing mad, and went to the gambling saloons to forget the vision in excitement, but all to no purpose.

Every card I drew was a miniature of the little tavern girl.

A ruined gambler shot himself while I was there, and in the care-worn, hopeless face I saw the image of Nama!

The barbarous cruelties of the bull fight were inadequate to alloy the desire to see Nama, to repress her vision, constantly dancing before my eyes. In the form of every picadore, riding a dis-

embowled horse, I could trace the rounded outlines of the little waitress.

Impatient, weary, I would throw myself across the bed, only to dream of her. I had almost forgotten Madona, her stately form and queenly charms, and my heart became light and bouyant once more.

At last I determined to return to Vera Cruz!

One morning, after I had decided to return to Vera Cruz, to satisfy my longing to see Nama, a servant entered the room with my mail.

As time passed, letters from "the states" became less frequent, and my delight upon hearing from home increased proportionately.

Breaking the seal of the solitary letter, I eagerly perused its contents, and learned that my father, the terror of my childhood, the tyrant of my boyhood, and the stern parent of my youth was dead. He had died several months previous, but owing to the slowness and irregularity of the mail service, I was not made acquainted with the fact until then, although the date upon the letter indicated that there had been no delay in notifying me of the sad event. I say sad, because even I could shed a tear for that loveless old man.

How dark his life must have been! Cold and stern, he repelled friendship, and even his child-

ren feared to evince affection for him. No one understood him! How could they?

By my parent's death, I inherited a part of the large estate he left, and my sudden accession to fortune again made me uncertain whether I should return to Virginia, or Vera Cruz.

"I cannot leave Mexico without seeing Nama once more," I exclaimed, as I sprang from the bed, "I must see her, or go mad!"

CHAPTER XVII.

“All in, senors !”

A hurrying of feet, laughter, cries and oaths followed these words, pronounced in a loud voice by the guard on the morning mail coach for Vera Cruz, and indicated that the vehicle was on the point of leaving, or that it might leave at any moment during the next two hours.

At intervals of every half hour, the guard would shout, “All in, senors,” to keep up an interest among the passengers, and it never failed to produce the desired effect, as each call might prove the last.

After answering the summons several times, I curled myself comfortably in a corner of the coach, intending to steal a nap before we started.

When the guard saw that I did not care whether we moved, or stood still, though preferring the latter condition at the time, he gave the signal for departure, and after a final and vociferous. “All in,” we rolled out of the city.

Jolting over the rough road, we made the first day's journey. Toward noon, on the second day, as we were passing through a dense thicket of chapparel, the coach came to a sudden standstill. A loud scream was raised among the

female portion of the passengers, while the men stupidly sat still and whispered to each other:

“It is the banditti!”

“If a gang of thieves have stopped the diligence,” I exclaimed, springing to my feet, “there are enough men here to oppose them!”

“Senor will please take his seat,” said a calm voice at the window.

Glancing in that direction, I saw a neat looking Spaniard standing there, emphasising his request with a cocked pistol in his hand. I seated myself with alacrity, not caring to ascertain if the weapon were loaded.

“If you will not be incommoded,” said the gentlemanly highwayman, “I would be pleased to see you on the outside, senors.”

My fellow travellers promptly obeyed the summons, and ranged themselves in line along the road, to accommodate the robbers, as though experienced in dealing with bandits, and anxious to get through the business as quickly as possible. Seven plainly dressed men stood on the outside, to receive us. They wore no masks and would look like unpretentious farmers, had it not been for the belt of arms they wore.

When they had finished rifling our pockets, a guard was detailed to watch us, while the others tore open the mail sacks, and express boxes, and

appropriated that portion of the contents which pleased them, or was of any value.

After looking through the mail, they replaced the open letters in the sacks, and bidding us an affectionate farewell, told the driver that he might proceed.

For some time after the robbery, an embarrassed silence oppressed the travellers. There was not a man in the coach who felt like looking his neighbor in the eyes.

We travelled in this manner for a few miles, when, in entering the out-skirts of a small village, we passed a gibbet from which the bodies of three criminals were dangling.

“They must be the remains of highwaymen,” said a little man, sitting in a conspicuous position near the center of the coach.

The words were no sooner uttered than a loud cheer arose from my fellow passengers, who noisily evinced their approval of the idea, and fervently consigned the bandits we had just parted company with to the same fate.

Then succeeded hand-shaking and congratulations, which effectually dispelled the gloom, and broke the silence.

As we rumbled over the streets of Vera Cruz, my impatience to see Nama became alarming in its manifestations.

My excitement showed itself in many strange ways. My companions watched me with wonder, not unmixed with fear, as I would spring to the window, peer out, then rap at the pane, and return to my seat.

At last, greatly to the relief of my fellow travellers, and to my own, we arrived at the Imperial tavern, where I alighted.

Knocking loudly on the door, I demanded admittance.

After repeating the knock several times, I saw a light glimmer under the door, and heard the slip-shod tread of some one approaching to give me audience.

I forgot that everybody I knew in Vera Cruz thought me dead, and composedly awaited the opening of the door, as though I had been expected back.

“Who’s there?” demanded a female voice, which I recognized to be that of Dame Isabella.

“It is I—Captain Benjamin?” was my loud response, hoping to attract Nama’s attention as she usually lurked near the door when it was opened to satisfy her curiosity as to the visitor.

The heavy bolts were slowly drawn aside, and the door was partly opened.

The gray head of the old woman, made hideous by a hateful grin, was thrust through the opening.

“Oh, captain, it’s you come, is it?” she exclaimed, harshly.

“Yes, it is I,” was my response, “can I—can I get my bed-room back again?”

“No,” she answered, bursting into a rage, “not here! we are attending to the work you left us, and have no time to do more.”

“I do not understand you, woman,” I returned, burning with impatience, “explain yourself! Let me see Nama first, I have returned to her.”

“You have come back to see the little girl,” shrieked the hag, laughly hoarsely and tossing her thin arms wildly about her head. “Go away, senor, go away. Do not look upon the destruction you have worked. You are late—*too late!* Nama will never see you more!”

“Great God,” I cried, in the excess of my anguish, “tell me, woman, tell me, is she dead?”

“Worse, much worse,” was the terrible answer, “come and see!”

I followed her into the house and up the stairway I had climbed so often before, passing familiar objects at every turn.

“Do you want to see Nama,” whispered the old woman turning to me, as she stopped before the door of my former apartment.

“Yes,” I muttered, holding my breath in anticipation of some awful disclosure.

Thrusting the key in the lock, she threw open the door.

I dared not enter, a feeling of dreadful foreboding held me back.

“Ha, senor,” exclaimed Dame Isabella, “you are not afraid so soon! What will you do when you know all?”

Roused by her words, I stepped into the room, and by the light of the candle she held in her hand, I could see the room just as I had left it.

No, not as I had left it!

In one corner crouched a dark, little form, chattering to itself.

As the rays of light fell upon it, the figure sprang to its feet and rushed at us.

It was Nama — mad!

“You shall not,” she cried, striking fiercely at the intruders, “he is mine — you shall not take him from me!”

Then forgetting the cause of her rage, she began to sing an old Spanish love ditty.

Speechless with horror, I looked at Nama, and thought with a sinking heart, that I had been the cause of her madness.

The unrepressed tears trickled down my cheeks, and the agony I felt I did not think nor care to conceal.

“We have suffered,” muttered the old woman,

with an appearance of grim pleasure, "why should he not do so—it is just!"

"Nama, oh, Nama," I cried, passionately, hoping sufficient reason remained for her to recognize me, "it is I—Carlos has returned."

The dolorous song continued. I staggered toward the door.

"It is enough," I cried, in deep despair, "let me go!"

As the door closed behind me, I could still hear the mirthless singer, and I fled down the stairway to escape the torture which her shrill, expressionless voice inflicted.

"Beware of Juan," whispered Dame Isabella, as I left the house.

Regardless of her words, I rushed into the streets, not knowing whither, but away!

"Hold, senor" cried a voice, near me, "a word with you!"

"I have no time to bandy words," I answered, not stopping for a moment.

"Hold, dastard," repeated the man, placing himself directly in my way, "do you fear to face me?"

"I do not know you," I replied, attempting to pass him, "why should I fear a stranger?"

"Have you forgotten Juan Tarf, Nama's brother," hissed the Mexican.

“Is it you, Juan? I have just returned from —from the inn and have learned all. It is terrible!”

“Yes, it is all your work and you must answer to me for it! Are you armed?”

“I will have no quarrel with you—I could not strike Nama’s brother!”

“Then if you are too cowardly to fight, die in the gutter as a dog!”

The infuriated man had drawn his stiletto, and advanced toward me.

“Villianous Mexican,” I replied, enraged at his words, “had you followed the dictates of your cowardly nature, you would have stabbed me in the back!”

Drawing my knife, for I had learned to carry one while in Mexico, I faced my antagonist.

No one, save those who have passed through such a contest, can realize its horror.

Standing facing each other waiting an opportunity—a sudden spring forward, a short struggle and a stagger back, then all is over!

For some time I stood facing the Mexican in watchful suspense, expecting to feel the cold blade of his poniard in my breast at every moment.

He made a sudden attack, and we grappled. Raising my dagger, I struck him a blow in the

side. The knife dropped from his hand, and without a sound, Juan fell prostrate at my feet.

No one saw the encounter save Dame Isabella, who made no outcry, and did not interpose. Not daring to look at the unfortunate young man, and dreading to look back, I hurried away.

That night I could not sleep, and paced the floor of the room I had engaged at one of the larger taverns, thinking of the brother and sister whose lives I had blighted. Nama's voice rang in my ear all night, and my imagination conjured up a vision of Juan, covered with the blood flowing from the wound I had inflicted.

Every noise that reached my ears I interpreted as the police approaching to arrest me for my crime.

At last, worn out by the ceaseless strain, I threw myself across the bed and fell asleep.

My slumber was disturbed by frightful dreams and when I awoke my mind was almost deranged.

Morning came at last and I hurried back to Nama.

Dame Isabella met me at the door, her eyes red with weeping. Upon asking to see Nama, she informed me that the physicians were in the room, which was open, then turned her head away from me, as though she could not bear the sight of my face.

“Both gone,” I heard her say, as I was going up the steps, “and he is the cause of it all — Santa Maria!”

A crowd of Mexican physicians were assembled in the room.

Nama lay on the bed, terribly burned. Her long black curls were scorched and charred, and her beautiful face was black and disfigured.

A lighted candle had been left in her room and the accident resulted.

As I entered, the physicians turned a gaze of abhorrence upon me, as one of them said, in an under tone :

“It is he!”

As I looked at the ghastly object upon the bed, the only sign of remaining animation was an occasional gasp, when she would roll her sightless eyes and moan piteously.

Even after afflicting her until the mind could endure no more anguish, stern fate had inflicted physical suffering that the wretched girl might drain to the dregs her cup of woe!

As I watched her, the signs of remaining animation became less frequent, as time passed, until they ceased altogether.

Fervently I prayed that she might be restored to me, but my selfish prayer was not heard, and Nama, becoming weaker every moment, was finally

called to God.

Yes, I bent over that gasping form and saw life slowly leave the body—slowly, that I might feel the increased pain of seeing hope and joy ebb with each dying breath.

“She is dead,” at last, said one of the physicians, bending over the stiffening form.

I had come to Nama’s bed-side, with the stain of her brother’s death upon my soul, only to see her die.

Life to me has passed! I had lived my part through. Youthful ambition no longer buoyed my sinking heart and life’s gloom closed about me.

I followed Nama’s little coffin to the grave and returned—an old man.

I afterward heard of Madona and learned that she was very happy with her husband. They resided in the city of Mexico for several years, then visited Spain and, upon returning to Mexico, made their home near Vera Cruz. It is a beautiful place, with a grand view of the city and surrounding country, and is situated in a park that equals in age, and beauty, any that can be found in Europe. Where her home is sit-

uated once stood an Aztec palace. Her husband is very rich, and Madona is now the mother of several children. All this information interests me greatly, for I rejoice to know that the proud woman is happy even though she did cause me such terrible misery. Perhaps, she thinks of me, sometimes; at least, she should remember the man, who gave up more than life for her sake.

THE END.

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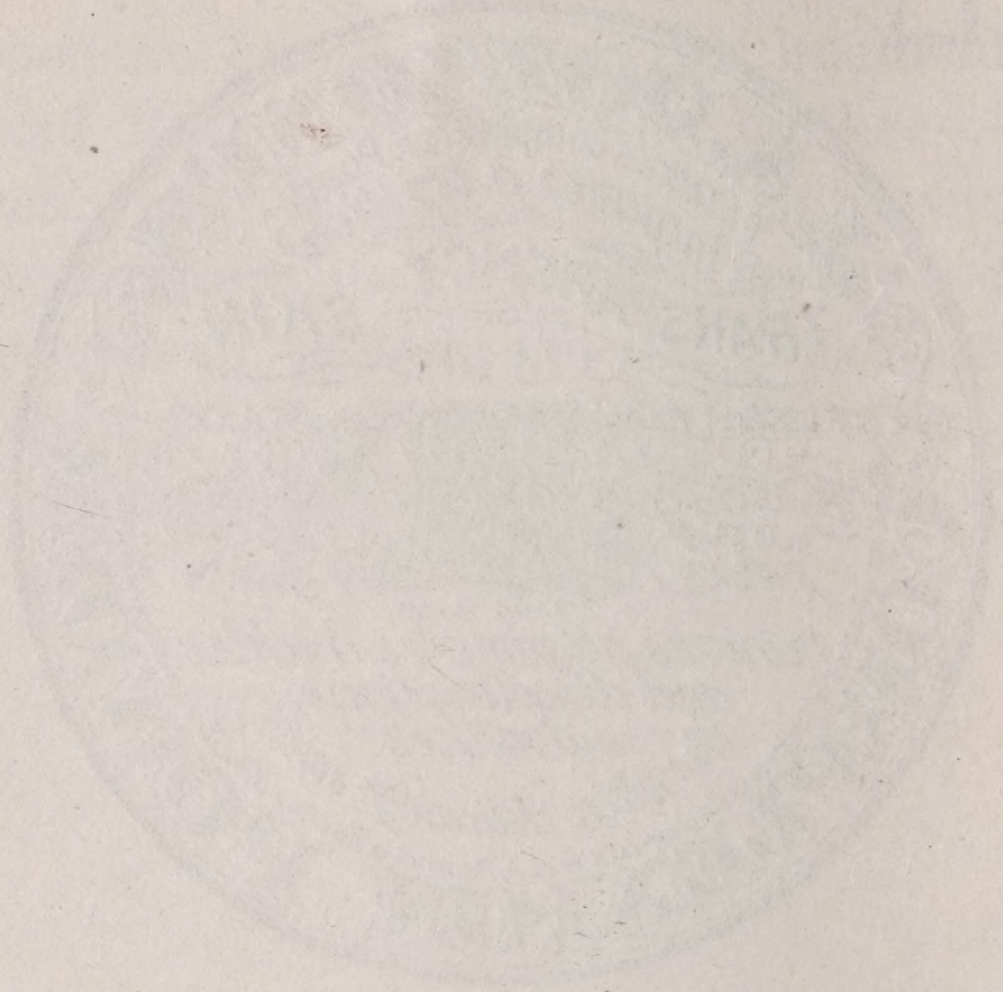
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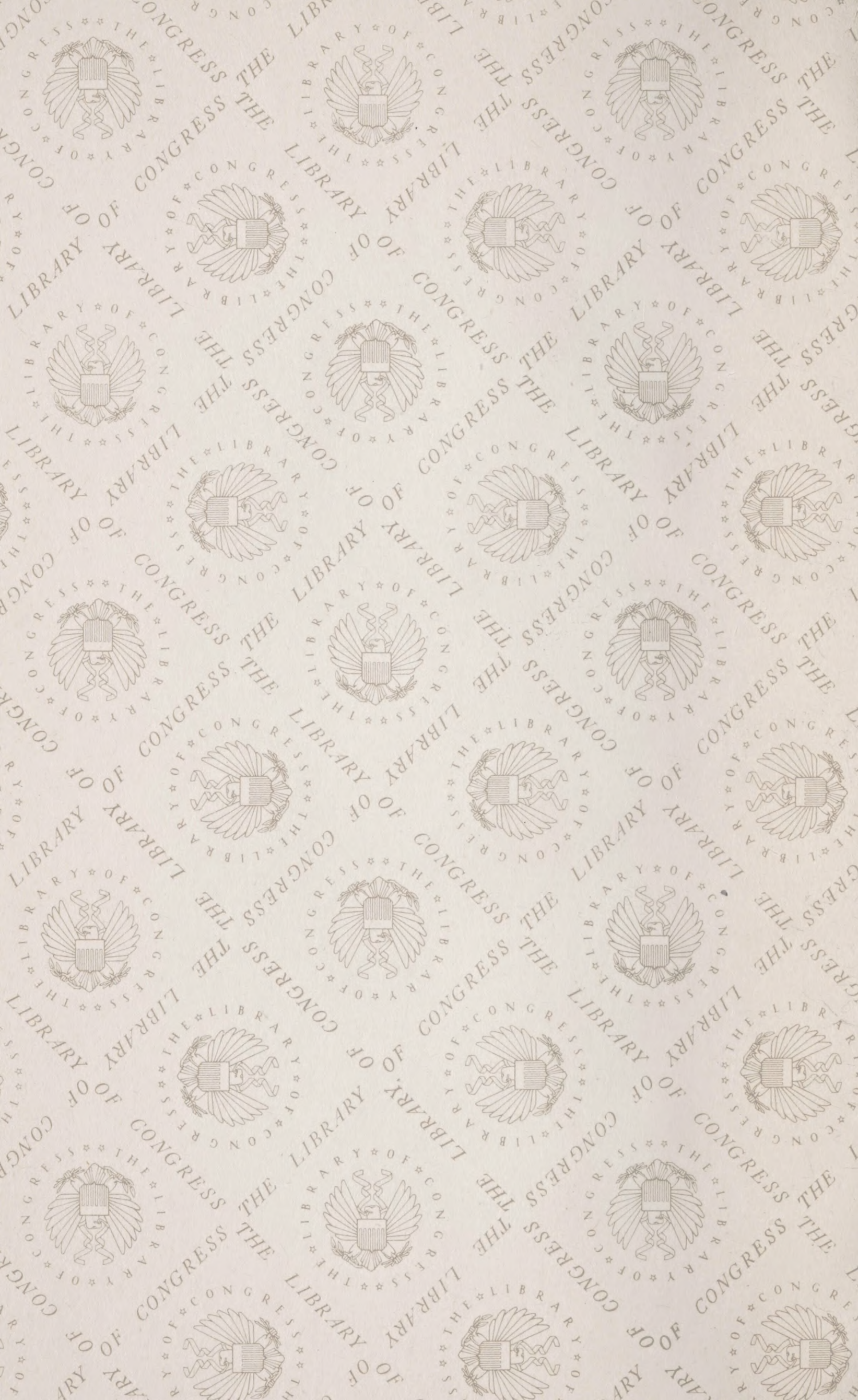
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